いちばんうしろの大魔王 ACT13

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Prologue

I finally felt like writing it.

“It” being this story, of course. However, I must first talk about “stories”.

We read stories. It can be in movies, in serial dramas, in manga, or in novels. We of course read them for enjoyment, but that sense of enjoyment is often backed by the expectation of wondering what will happen next.

In other words, it is assumed there will be some form of ending.

Needless to say, there are some stories that seem about to end yet one does not want to end, but the fact remains that it is assumed that a story has an ending.

To view it in a rational light, a story is something in which the characters die or are saved.

That is why stories that move people – myself included – truly begin with their ending. It can be a tragedy or a comedy. Complex causal relationships gather toward a single conclusion and the power brought about by various coincidences and human fates burst open a single final point! The story exists for that final point. Whether it takes the form of the grim reaper’s scythe or the bond of the red string of fate, destiny exists for the ending.

And as everyone who has read this far knows, stories are fictional and yet we are still controlled by them in our real lives.

In other words…yes, we think of things from the perspective of the ending.

When a boy and girl meet, we ask whether they will end up together or part ways.

When a crime is committed, we ask if the criminal will escape or be captured.

When we live, we ask if we will be fortunate or fall into ruin.

Our minds are thoroughly infected by the virus that we call stories. There is no free will there.

Humans cannot perceive time as a sensation. We instead perceive it as a story.

In the early 2000's, I received a phone call from an old friend in front of my apartment in Yamato, Kanagawa. I assumed they were inviting me to hang out, but they instead informed me the ex girlfriend I had broken up with about half a year prior had died. I had not contacted her even once since we broke up, but my friend had been receiving news about her from someone else.

"Eh? Really?"

<Really. I'll call you again once I know more.>

"Oh, man. So you're serious."

<Yeah. It seems that's how it is.>

"Hm, I see. Thanks for telling me."

I remember that meaningless conversation.

At the time, I felt no confusion or sadness. That's just how it is.

But when the same friend called me the following day and told me the cause of death, I felt somehow urged forward. I couldn't sit still and a strange impatience sent cold sweat dripping down my cheeks. It was not that her death finally felt real. It had never felt real. I was never going to meet her again regardless. What difference did it make if that was now an eternal thing?

Her cause of death was truly stupid. She had horrible headaches and took a bit more of her medicine than usual. This was not a suicide with sleeping pills or anything like that. Sometimes your body grows accustomed to a drug and you have to take more of it. The direct cause of death was what they call Economy Class Syndrome. In other words, it was a blood clot in an artery. Lying in the same position for a long period of time without drinking any water had led to her death.

I briefly wondered if she would not have died had she not broken up with me. I'm not trying to boast, but I can be fairly attentive when it comes to looking after others. I would likely have been managing the medicine and having her do some light daily exercise. However, that was the exact reason she had broken up with me. She apparently found that side of me annoying.

I wondered if she might have lived had I been looking after her.

I knew that future was impossible. I knew that, but I continued asking the question.

That was the source of the impatient feeling.

She had chosen a death similar to suicide. That is, she had lived in a way that more easily tended towards death. She was oblivious when it came to her own health and yet she was sensitive to anything that threatened her mental state, so she chose inactivity over activity and she interpreted kindness as an attack. In the long run, that could be called constantly choosing death in multiple situations.

It is commonly said that any animal that chooses suicide is insane. There was a rumor of lemmings committing mass suicide, but that was proven to be false. (It was set up for a documentary.) There are several confirmed suicidal actions among living creatures, but as research has advanced, it has become clear that almost all of them are caused by parasites or toxins from another living creature. For example, the hairworm resides within a praying mantis host and has the praying mantis jump into a river. The hairworm can only mate within the water, so it kills its host and jumps out into the water. Also, a certain type of wasp can control the brain of the roaches it lays its eggs in. The toxin it injects removes the roach's will and prevents it from feeling pain as the larva hatch and eat it from the inside. On top of that, the wasp guides it to the wasp's burrow while it can still walk, so it actually walks to its own grave.

Humans are living creatures, too. In that case, shouldn't we try to live no matter what? Isn't it unthinkable for humans to commit suicide?

Yes. Humans do not die by their own will.

So what is it that we call suicide?

There is a single answer.

Someone is controlling those human's minds.

Let me reiterate: our minds are infected by the virus that we call stories and someone injected that virus into us.

That is why humans commit suicide. They take a reckless action and they die.

But as is standard for parasites, stories also benefit humans.

People cannot perceive time as a sensation. We instead perceive it as a story. Without a perception of time, we would likely have never developed the intelligence we have. Stories are intelligence.

So should we cast aside those stories?

No, we must never do that.

If we do not do that, they will end.

Stories always end. For mankind, that ending is the time of destruction. That is the time in which we discover the objective of the one who implanted the stories within us.

Will something hatch within our brains?

Will we be devoured by something gigantic after our deaths?

If so, can you cast aside those stories this very instant?

We must think about the original human race and the origin of stories.

Now, let us go see the answer for ourselves.

Chapter 1: We Have a Life even in the Underworld

Junko made no attempt to move away from Akuto and he did not make her. A forest lay before them and they had to enter it. That alone would be worrisome enough, but this was the world of the afterlife. Technically, they did not know what this place was, but that was the only name they had for it. Whatever the case, they were definitely completely lost.

Ahead of them was a forest, behind them was an ocean, and both seemed to extend forever.

They stood on the beach and that shore felt like the scenery of an ending to Akuto.

“This isn’t a virtual alternate dimension…or is it? Either way, look at this imagery.”

“Yes, it is oddly appropriate for the imagery of the afterlife.” Junko peered into the forest. “Didn’t Dante’s Divine Comedy begin in a forest?”

“I know what you mean, but we have no faith in that way. We have only borrowed that Christian imagery. It is strange that this is so fitting for imagery of the afterlife, though.”

As he spoke, Akuto held Junko's hand and urged her into the forest.

"Anyway, the forest is the only place we can go."

The beach did not continue forever, but it was surrounded on either side by almost perfectly vertical cliffs.

"Y-yes. But it still worries me. And there is not a path through the forest."

She hesitantly followed him into the trees.

"I can clear a path for us," suggested Akuto.

But to their surprise, they found a small forest path after moving past two or three overlapping trees.

"Good, a path. That really helps," said Junko with a stiff smile.

"But this also means people have come here before."

Akuto stepped onto the path and looked ahead, but he could not see where it led. The path had no undergrowth, the dirt had been packed down, and it continued on while winding through the trees.

"Does this mean there is someone here?" asked Junko while looking around worriedly. "P-please give me a break… Honestly…"

"There's nothing to worry about," said Akuto as he moved ahead.

"Of course there is," she said while begrudgingly following him. "Anyone here would be of the dead."

"We're dead too."

"I do not feel like it at all."

"Most of mankind should be dead. If we assume everyone is here, the threat should be no different from before."

"You really are quick to find an answer."

She had started walking hesitantly, but after a while, her pace grew lighter. Even so, she continued to cling to his arm and he matched his pace to hers.

"Looks like it's the same even here," said Akuto.

"Wh-what is? I feel like this world is a lot different from the one we lived in."

"No, I meant we can still see just fine even in the forest. Did you not notice? There's light here."

She looked around and realized he was right.

“Oh, now that you mention it. I could not see the sun, but I could still see on the beach.”

“And yet the leaves are growing so thickly overhead. There’s no light source and yet we can see. That’s what it comes down to.”

“Since this is the afterlife, it might not be that strange. Oh, right. Didn’t beasts attack at this point in the Divine Comedy?”

She sounded afraid and they happened to hear a distant howl at that very moment.

“Eee!”

She jumped in fright, but Akuto could tell it was a four-legged beast such as a wolf or lion and he tilted his head at the howl that gave some sense of its form.

“I never heard a howl like this while working part-time at the zoo.”

“R-really? Then is it a demonic beast?”

Junko’s voice was still trembling.

“I doubt it. At any rate, there was no sign of life until now.”

“No, there was not,” she agreed.

The bestial howl ended.

“Hm,” grunted Akuto as he came to some sort of understanding. “Then there must be a city at the end of the trail.”

Junko’s eyes opened wide at that.

“What? That cannot possibly-…”

She trailed off as they took a gentle curve and their vision opened up.

A city was visible down below. The two of them were standing in the mountains behind the school and they had a good view of the usual Imperial Capital.

“Wh-what…but…this is…”

She grew confused.

The capital had the same peaceful atmosphere as before the war, so it felt like they had travelled a few months back in time. Based on the sunlight, it was still a bit before noon. The difference in time of day helped make her feel dizzy.

Akuto had predicted this, but even he could not remain calm.

“I was right… But it’s still a little surprising.”

“H-how can you just accept this!?”

She lashed out at him both due to surprise and due to not understanding how he had predicted this.

“I have no proof, but I think this reflects our desires,” he answered.

“Our desires? I still do not really understand.”

“I had a feeling the things happening here were related to what you were imagining.”

“It is true everything I was afraid of seemed to happen,” she agreed.

“Yes, and that would explain why we can see without light and why we heard that beast in the forest.”

“Perhaps.”

Junko closed her eyes and focused her mind, but opened them again after a few seconds.

“But are you sure?”

“If this world – this world of the afterlife – does change based on our thoughts, only powerful thoughts must work.”

“I should be able to do that because it is the foundation of magic.”

She produced a mana sphere in her hand and made it rotate.

“That may only work because it’s a familiar action. Given the structure of this world, my thoughts may be the strongest.”

“I wonder if what happened on the beach was due to my subconscious thoughts. I was not controlling my fear or anxiety.”

“Perhaps. If so, it would show a bit of the possibilities and limits of this world.”

At that point, another voice cut in.

“Hey.”

They turned toward the slightly silly-sounding voice and found Kita Yoshie walking up the path.

“Kita-san?”

“Yoshie?”

They both spoke in surprise and stared at the girl’s face.

This was definitely Yoshie.

“I see you’re suspicious.”

“Of course we are. After all-…”

Yoshie cut Junko off and began speaking herself.

“No, I understand. It’s not surprising. I can’t say anything for sure as I only just got here, but based on the events or phenomena I’ve seen here…”

She used her usual roundabout manner of speech and this time Akuto cut her off with a bitter smile.

“In short, this place grants the wishes of the dead?”

Yoshie grinned and nodded.

“So you caught on. I guess I should’ve expected it of you.”

Junko shook her head in confusion as she watched them.

“I already heard about that, but then isn’t it odd for you to be here, Kita-san? After all, it means you might only be here because he or I wished for it.”

Her expression was perfectly serious and it was true they could not say for sure this was the real Yoshie if that were the case.

However, Yoshie replied without hesitating.

“That’s definitely a possibility. But is it a problem even if that’s what happened?”

“Eh? Are you saying it is not a problem?”

Yoshie’s comment had caught Junko by surprise.

“I have memories of being here before running across you two. Of course, you could say those memories were created just now, but those memories more or less guarantee we can live here just fine as long as we don’t think about it too much.”

She sounded confident.

“Is it…really okay?”

Junko was still concerned, but Yoshie further assured her.

“Our words can reach others and we have differences in opinion. I can sense our individual personalities here. If you know me, you’d know I had my doubts and investigated. However, it’s impossible to prove the existence of others, so I decided to just not think about it.” She pointed toward the city. “Look, the city is up and running. That happened while we weren’t looking. If nothing else, life is back to normal.”

Akuto sensed something odd about that statement and raised his eyebrow.

“If nothing else?”

Yoshie shrugged as if hesitant to speak.

“There are of course a lot of differences. It would be best to hear about it from the student council president. It would get complicated if I explained it.”

Yoshie then began walking toward the academy.

“Are we going to school?” asked Junko nostalgically.

“That’s right. It’s just easier to live there.”

It appeared to be class time. No students could be seen outside, but a look in the windows showed students filling the classrooms.

“It’s just like it used to be,” commented Akuto.

“Yeah, but something you’ll find strange is waiting here.”

With that comment that hinted at something to come, Yoshie called up the student council president with a student handbook. She then took Akuto and Junko to the student council room.

The school building’s layout had not changed, so there was no real need for her to show the way. Lily had called for them during class time and she seemed to have predicted this.

“I thought you might be interested in this,” she said sarcastically with no change of expression.

She showed them a mana screen on the desk containing data supplied by the “gods”.

“You might be wondering about the lack of a greeting, but it doesn’t feel like any time has passed. It hardly seems strange to have you two in here.”

Lily suggested they take a seat.

“It’s a moving reunion for me,” said Akuto seriously.

Lily gave a cruel smile.

“Stop that, world destroyer.”

She once more urged them to look at the data on the mana screen.

“This is the world before I was judged to be the demon king,” concluded Akuto after glancing through the list.

“I hate how good at that you are,” complained Lily. “But it does help since I hadn’t memorized all the statistical data. Let’s go as far back as it will let us.”

She sent the years of the statistics in reverse and Akuto nodded as he watched it.

“Yes, it’s the same as the data I remember. Return the time to the present. A birth certificate should come in in a few more minutes. If it does, it means we’re repeating history.”

“Does that mean this world of the afterlife is recreating the world from about two years before we died?” asked Junko.

Lily shook her head.

“It’s similar, but I don’t think it’s the same. As you may have noticed, there are no L’Isle-Adams here.”

“Really?”

Junko sounded surprised.

“Really. Arnoul is the only student council officer missing. Korone and the manual labor L’Isle-Adams are missing as well. Humans are working to maintain their lifestyle and…”

“Keena,” cut in Akuto.

“Yes. Keena alone is missing.”

“Are those two points the only changes?” asked Junko.

“The empress is Kazuko and there is no record of the black magicians being oppressed. If we’re going to describe the situation without getting overly conceptual…”

“Yes?”

“We’re at peace. It’s enough to leave me bored out of my mind. There’s no uprising by the black magicians, Zero isn’t ruling over us all via the gods and the L’Isle-Adams, there’s no record of the Republic even existing, and there’s no sign of any foreign countries resisting the empire.”

Lily folded her arms and rested her elbows on her desk.

“And that’s why you aren’t seen as unusual, Akuto-kun. You aren’t a demon king.”

“Really?” he asked back.

She nodded.

“Does that make you happy? You may have your doubts, but the demon king is said to be dead and he hasn’t been resurrected. There aren’t even rumors about it. It’s almost disappointing.”

Akuto’s expression made it clear he did not know how to take that.

“Th-this is not a bad thing,” muttered Junko in confusion. “No, it really is not. Good, good.”

However, she did not appear to have accepted it and she was watching Akuto’s expression.

“Is the timeline different here? Or is this merely the world someone wished for? Also, we have our memories of the past, but do the other people not?”

He was doubtful.

“This gets tricky if we start talking about time.”

Yoshie started to speak, but Lily stopped her.

“That would just confuse the issue, so please stop. The only people who have their memories are those close to you who knew the truth.”

“Oh, right. I know you don’t want me talking about time, but there’s something I have to say and I’ll do it quickly. Traveling through time was a

future technology that only Yamato Bouhichirou could use. You remember, don't you?" asked Yoshie.

"I do, but the device I used was-…"

"A completely different technology. I know. But there's another fact here that may actually be completely natural: Brave – that is, Hiroshi – is not here and he's the one who would have inherited the time traveling device."

Lily looked back at the screen displaying statistical data.

"The name Miwa Hiroshi is in here, so he is here. He just hasn't shown himself yet."

"Keena wasn't a part of this world from the beginning, but Hiroshi was? Then where is he?"

Akuto asked those questions to no one in particular.

Hiroshi was in the forest outside the city and he was facing a man he would never forget.

"Yamato Bouichirou."

His journey there after dying was the same as Junko and the others, but he alone had travelled along a different path. He had entered the forest as if being guided and he had all of a sudden found Bouichirou sitting on a tree stump. He himself did not know if this was destiny or if he had wished for it.

Even so, he felt this was a starting point toward what he needed to do. He had to ask Bouichirou several questions. Countless questions had been left unanswered by the man's death.

"I met the people from your team," said Hiroshi sarcastically.

"From that tone, I take it you did not enjoy the experience. They could be a rough bunch."

Bouichirou treated Hiroshi like an old friend and laughed. He seemed gentler than before and, when combined with his beautiful features, it surrounded him with an aura that charmed any who spoke with him.

Hiroshi had intended to complain, but that aura slowed him down.

"I was nearly killed countless times. Was that on your orders?"

"Of course not. I had realized it to a certain extent, but they lacked the same virtues I possess. All I can offer you is an apology, though."

"I don't need your apology. Did they die and come here too? If so, I have something else to complain about."

“Who can say? But it sounds like they would be unable to look me in the eye now.”

Bouichirou smiled.

“They wouldn’t be able to look anyone in the eye. They caused a mass immigration to this world by following your ambitions…or maybe not exactly your ambitions. It may have been a misunderstanding or an intentional distortion of what you wanted.”

Hiroshi left his wording vague, but it seemed to get through to Bouichirou.

“Yes, I thought it might come to that. And I gave up because I thought that might be an acceptable alternative.”

“Don’t act like you understood everything.”

“Fine. I was not trying to speak badly of those who died, but I did try to prevent that destruction.”

Bouichirou’s tone of voice increased the discomfort within Hiroshi.

“What are you trying to say?” he asked harshly.

“How about we explain this in chronological order? You know I tried to change history, correct?”

The man gave a self-deprecating smile.

“Yes, I do.”

“That was because I saw the world’s final great demon king awaken and I saw the extra-universal gods arrive to destroy the world.”

“I know that too. To avoid that, you said the demon king and the Law of Identity had to exchange vows, right? I didn’t really get what you meant, though.”

“Yes, but I never accomplished it.”

Hiroshi nodded as he thought back on his memories.

“I understand that much. To be saved by the Law of Identity, Zero and the machine gods tried to turn mankind into data just like them and then send them to another dimension. That way it would not matter if mankind was destroyed. And it was aniki – the current demon king – who gave us some extra time.”

“Yes. And as a result, the future changed from the one I knew.”

“Are you saying that was a mistake?” asked Hiroshi.

Bouichirou shrugged.

“It’s hard to say whether it was or not. This world of the afterlife is that extra time. This here is the extra time that the demon king gave to mankind. It is not over yet.”

“It isn’t over yet?”

Hiroshi tilted his head.

“However, this place may be the end. Having no end may be the end. In other words, time may flow for all eternity here.”

Bouichirou’s words made Hiroshi sigh.

“Could you maybe phrase things in an understandable way?”

“Sorry. I’ve always been like this and I can’t seem to stop. The future may have changed from the one I knew, but you could say the conclusion was exactly as I predicted. I know what happened in the history you experienced. I negotiated with the thought entity named The One in order to reach an agreement with the extra-universal gods. They too wanted a world they could live in without fear of an inter-universal invasion.”

Hiroshi worked to understand. Once he broke it down into individual elements, he found he could grasp the meaning.

“But The One betrayed you.”

“Yes, and the Republic attacked the empire despite having been so calm. They appear to be unrelated events, but if you view them on the backdrop of an invasion from outside the universe, most everything can be predicted and linked together. The devices left behind by the early magical civilization, the black magicians’ plan, and the Formless Power were all prepared to face that invasion. The fact that the invasion was a success means the future ultimately could not be changed.”

“When you put it that way, I can sort of understand,” said Hiroshi. “But if this place is our ‘extra time’, don’t we still have a chance?”

“Still have a chance? What do you mean by that?”

It was now Bouichirou’s turn to ask a question.

“A chance to change the past. It seems simple to me. We stop the internal conflict and the elimination of the magical civilization and instead advance a plan to win the war against the extra universal gods.”

Hiroshi sounded confident and he pointed at the bracelet that was the Brave suit.

“I can travel through time with this, right? Is it still possible even after dying?”

“You sure are hasty. In the end, do you want to save mankind?”

Bouichirou’s eyes opened in surprise.

“I don’t know, but I sense something like destiny here.” Hiroshi grinned. “At the very least, the demon king can’t save mankind, right?”

“If that is what you wish, then fine.” Bouichirou shook his head. “But changing the future is difficult.”

“Is it really? You said you died and the future changed. In that case, simply changing it can’t be that hard.”

“No, it did not change. In the end, you all came here.”

He pointed toward the ground with a cynical expression.

“Here?”

“The afterlife.”

“Having all these different worlds is confusing. The real world, virtual alternate dimensions, outside the universe, non-virtual alternate dimensions, and the afterlife. Does that cover it?”

Hiroshi frowned and Bouichirou corrected him.

“Not quite. What you referred to as ‘outside the universe’ and ‘non-virtual alternate dimensions’ are the same thing. Not much is known about those alternate dimensions. We only know there are likely an infinite number. You had the rest right and the Law of Identity is related to them all. Most likely, she created them. That is why they are relatively easy to understand.”

“Keena-chan created them and so we can understand them?”

“To me, she was Sudou Rimu. When I say we can understand them, I mean those worlds can be simply described. You merely need to understand that our universe was created by the Law of Identity.”

“Can you really be so sure? And weren’t we talking about traveling through time to change history?” complained Hiroshi.

He was losing track of what he wanted from the conversation and Bouichirou laughed when he noticed.

“If you are to travel through time, I want you to understand that our knowledge and our world contradict each other.”

“Is it just me or are you straying from the point again?”

“I am not. According to our knowledge, what is time?”

It was an abstract question, but Hiroshi realized it had taken a step toward the core of the issue. To redo the world and avoid that conclusion, he had to understand what time was.

As a student, he had a certain level of education about the physical concept of time, so he gave the textbook answer.

“Time is relative and it can be compared to the space in which an object moves. The higher the speed, the larger the space the object can move through and the more possible phenomena it can encounter, but the object can only move in one direction. In two-dimensional terms, it is like only being able to choose one point on the circumference of an expanding ripple in the water.”

“That is more or less it. A single object cannot exist in multiple places simultaneously, but that rule falls apart here. That is why I was able to travel back in time.”

Bouichirou picked up a branch and drew a line on the ground.

“An object cannot exist in multiple places simultaneously because time actually has a smallest unit. If time – that is, the space you compared it to – can be infinitely divided, the paradox of Achilles and the tortoise can be achieved.”

He made a mark at the center of the line and then another mark at the center of the newly divided line’s right half. Once he had divided it 32 times, the width of the marks was greater than the width of the line portion.

“If these marks represent matter’s smallest unit, this is how it works.”

“I understand that, but how does that relate to being able to travel back in time? In fact, this understanding of time means you can’t transcend it.”

“Exactly. In the water ripple model, the other points on the circumference are nothing but possibilities. In other words, they are what could have happened but did not happen. Even if a single piece of matter returns to the previous point, the rest of the matter is no longer there. However, the world we are so familiar with did not function under the water ripple model.”

He used his foot to erase the line and drew a different line.

“This world is constructed in a way impossible under the laws of theoretical physics. You could say this world is like a recording on a single tape or like a chapter of text. It has linearity.”

He drew multiple squares on the line and the number of squares increased the further right he reached.

“All matter exists simultaneously in these squares and the past remains as the past. You can view the past as a pile of blocks that continues to grow larger. In that case, it is possible to rearrange the blocks.”

“And that’s why it should be possible to rewrite history and change the future,” agreed Hiroshi.

“Yes. Changing it is possible,” replied Bouichirou.

“Then tell me how to use the suit.”

Hiroshi pointed toward the Brave suit glowing on his wrist.

“I will of course do so, but as I said in the beginning, I must warn you that this is useless.”

Bouichirou gave a troubled frown.

“You keep saying that, but why is it useless if it’s possible to change history?”

“As I said before, you will ultimately come here for some reason.”

He pointed toward the ground.

“In other words, to the afterlife?”

Hiroshi frowned, but Bouichirou’s expression remained unchanged.

“Yes. And you will likely return to this spot and this instant countless times.”

Chapter 2: Eternal Happiness

“Okay, it’s time for class,” lazily said Torii Mitsuko, a teacher. “Isn’t it great that nothing really happened even though that meteor hit?”

She laughed and the students laughed loudly along with her.

“That demon king sure summoned something terrible.”

“And Brave died keeping it from doing too much damage, right?”

The classroom filled with various voices.

“But when I saw the meteor hit, I thought I was dead for sure,” carelessly said Mitsuko. “I don’t know when exactly everything recovered, though.”

It seemed everything was as it was a few days after Akuto had transferred in.

Akuto and Junko had started attending classes partway through, but Mitsuko-sensei’s attitude and the curious looks turned Akuto’s way told them what everyone thought had happened.

It seemed a lot of them were not aware they had died. Some things likely felt out of place to them, but the world had not changed and there was no threat of war. Their lives were no different than when they had been alive, so there may not have been any point in realizing they were dead.

More importantly, Akuto was completely surprised by how his classmates treated him. His magical skill had not weakened any, but they did not fear him as the demon king.

The magical classes and standard classes were easy for him. The looks of envy his classmates gave him were nice, but that was nothing compared to how wonderful it felt to be treated like a human.

“That transfer student is amazing.”

“I can see why the class rep has fallen for him. Aren’t you his fiancée? Way to go.”

“H-hey! Stop that!”

Junko blushed and argued back, but when she hid her face in embarrassment, she did so in the shirt on Akuto’s chest. Their experiences together that went beyond mere battlefields seemed to have added to her

love for Akuto because she had begun honestly expressing her feelings for him. This was of course not a bad thing for Akuto.

“Maybe we should get a little more used to being together,” he said with a smile.

When their classmates whistled with no intention of making fun, he could only shrug with a satisfied expression.

“How could I ever get used to being with someone as dangerous as you?” spat back Junko to hide her embarrassment.

The others gasped and backed away.

Once class ended, Etou Fujiko ran in with frightening speed and leaped toward Akuto because she had heard what had happened.

“Akuto-samaaaa! I missed yoooouuuu!”

Fujiko was usually graceful, so this great energy sent a stir through the students. To her, this was a reunion after much hardship and thus crying or weeping would only be natural, but it looked like a sudden madness to the students.

“W-wait, Fujiko-san.”

Akuto grew flustered and she seemed to regain some of her calm. She adjusted her disheveled uniform and cleared her throat toward the surrounding students.

“Ahem. I apologize. You see, Akuto-sama is my childhood friend. We were neighbors and we would often move between each other’s second story windows.”

The secret wink she gave Akuto made it clear she was making this up on the spot.

—*This is just like when Keena reverted the world before.*

He now accepted the truth of Lily’s words. Those deeply involved in the situation had not lost their memories and the others had their memories missing or altered. Also, Fujiko had arrived in this world ahead of him and she had noticed the difference in what the people who came later said.

“Um, Fujiko-san?”

“Oh, come on, Akuto-sama. …Oh, I use ‘-sama’ because he is the man who should lead this empire. When we were together, he would refer to me as his sister and I would simply call him Akuto.”

Fujiko raised her voice so the surrounding people could hear, but this was the first Akuto had heard of this too. Both boys and girls let out cries and they could not hide their jealousy toward Akuto.

“W-wait. Stop clinging to him like that! Etou-san!”

Junko charged out of the crowd and it was obvious the situation was about to grow even more complicated, but Fujiko calmly wrapped her arm around Akuto’s and spoke in an obviously teasing tone of voice.

“Oh, Hattori-san…no, Junko-chan. You need to try to get along. After all, polygamy is normal in this world. Akuto-sama can have four or five wives without issue!”

“Give it a rest, Etou-san.”

Junko frowned in displeasure and brought a hand to the wooden sword at her waist, but she froze in place when she noticed her classmates’ reaction.

“I had a feeling that would happen.”

“I don’t like it, but I could see Sai marrying both Etou-san and the class rep.”

“Maybe I should be Sai-kun’s wife too.”

All of them were making similar comments.

“You have to be kidding me,” said Junko blankly.

Akuto also turned toward Fujiko.

Fujiko embraced his head and whispered to him.

“It’s true. Polygamy has been conveniently allowed for our sake. You only need to marry us and we will truly be husband and wives. Then we can live together with no one getting in our way.”

Her sexual tone of voice told him just how long Fujiko had been waiting for this.

“Students are only allowed a proper and moral married life,” cut in a sudden voice.

It belonged to Yoshie who had cut through the ring of students. She wore a lab coat over a suit, so it was obvious she had been in the middle of work. In her normal life, she was a genius who had graduated school early and already worked as a priest.

“Kita-san.”

Akuto was thankful to her for slowing Fujiko down because he had no idea what Fujiko would have done otherwise, but Yoshie waved her hand.

“ ‘Kita-san’? Don’t be so formal. We’re about to get married, after all.”

Yoshie gave a mischievous smile. The other day, she had said there were “a lot of differences”, but she had been hiding that this was the largest one.

Hearing that, Akuto and Junko completely forgot it was safest to hide the fact that their memories differed from everyone else’s.

“Married!?”

“Ha ha. Did you forget the date, Akuto-kun? You already have all the credits you need here, so hurry up and pass the exam so you can graduate. Any temple would be willing to take you. They’ve been trying to create a position for you since you aren’t bound to any specific sect.”

Yoshie quickly provided several new facts for Akuto.

He had difficulty handling all the new information, but he began to realize his former dream was being granted here. It still did not feel real, but he felt it would be easier to preserve this happiness by fulfilling the job he was being given here than doing anything from his previous experiences.

—This was my dream before transferring to this school and before being told I was a demon king.

An enrapturing possibility lay before him. He could help others, he had more than enough power to do so, and he had three girls who truly understood him and loved him. What more could he ask for?

“Is this really okay?” he said to no one in particular.

“Of course it is.”

“It is.”

Yoshie and Fujiko nodded with large smiles covering their faces.

Seeing that, Junko’s stiff expression gradually loosened up.

“I-I am not sure what to say… Could you all stop this? It is kind of embarrassing.”

She covered her face with her arms and began to tremble.

“Don’t cry. You look like you only just now learned what happiness is,” cruelly teased Yoshie.

“There’s nothing I can really say,” said Akuto with an embarrassed smile.

One of the surrounding classmates began clapping and the applause eventually spread out into the hallway. It sounded like a popular singer was on stage.

“Oh, right. My new home was just finished, so I came to invite you all.”

Yoshie waved her raised thumb to say to head outside.

The crowd parted to form a path and they saw Akuto and the girls off with a smile. If they had not been in school, they would have scattered flowers overhead.

The four of them passed through the human arch and arrived on the schoolyard. Yoshie walked toward a land car stopped behind the school and a group called out to them from a seldom-used passageway.

The group of male students did not wear their uniforms properly and they had eccentric hairstyles that seemed intended to threaten those around them.

—*I guess it isn’t all happiness.*

Akuto looked toward the largest boy who appeared to be the leader.

All of them could only be described as delinquents and that large boy with the most brutal-looking face walked toward him.

“I don’t like it. I just don’t. People like us have nothing and then there’s people like you who have everything.”

Akuto recalled the name of this boy who had a deep voice.

—*Takeshi. That takes me back.*

On Fujiko’s instructions, he had been the first one to pick a fight with Akuto when they had been alive.

Akuto turned to Fujiko, but she shook her head and whispered that he had nothing to do with her.

“I see. A fight, is it? Yeah, you want a fight. Now, how should I handle this?”

Akuto smiled from the bottom of his heart. He felt oddly relieved that someone was willing to oppose him even here. If everything went too well, it made him worry. However, this meant he would still experience conflict and not everything would go his way. That was certainly a part of being happy.

“Don’t be ridiculous. We’ve seen a hell that a sheltered boy like you couldn’t even imagine. You can’t stand up to us in a neat and tidy way.”

Takeshi did not seem to consider losing a possibility and a sadistic smile appeared on his face.

—Oh, he's hiding a special baton and an incantation gun. And the rest of them are planning to attack on his signal. Two have knives and the rest have bats or crowbars.

Akuto instantly saw through their intentions and what they hid underneath their clothes and he understood how skilled they were at magic. Knowing all that, he smiled toward Takeshi.

"I don't feel like getting into the details, but I suggest you stop this. You won't gain anything from this."

"Heh heh heh." Takeshi laughed while ignoring the warning and approaching with a swaying gait. "Oh, I'll gain from this. You'll be the one that loses something here."

Takeshi's followers laughed out loud and he threw a punch without warning.

It was a surprise attack, but Akuto dodged it simply by tilting his head.

"That's dangerous, you know?"

His complete lack of fear angered Takeshi.

"Looks like you're a fast little bastard."

He jerked his chin toward his followers and they formed a large circle around Akuto and the girls. They were planning to rush in all at once.

"Cowards," said Junko with a grimace.

The followers gave perverted grins when they saw Junko's attitude.

"Oh, oh. You're a cute one."

"Don't be scared. We don't hit girls. We just make sure they have a good time."

Their vulgar laughs changed the look on Junko's face. She looked on the verge of reaching for her real sword rather than the wooden one.

"Don't kill them." Akuto shook his head. "Leave it to me."

In her current state, Junko could defeat the entire group, but she might kill them while she was at it.

"But…" she mumbled.

"Don't worry. I have plenty of experience and I know defeating them would only leave a grudge. Which means…"

Takeshi seemed unable to resist as Akuto talked on and on.

"Shut the hell up!" he shouted with a swing of his right hand.

It was a large hook that would be easy to dodge.

But there was a trick to it. The punch was just for show and the real attack was the special baton hidden up his sleeve. If Akuto dodged the hook by tilting his head like before, the baton would hit him when it protruded from the sleeve.

Akuto caught on from the beginning, so he stepped forward, grabbed Takeshi's arm, lightly twisted, and tossed him into the air. Rather than tearing off the boy's arm, he threw his entire body through the air.

"Hyah?"

He let out a questioning cry as he flew. Flight techniques were some of the more difficult ones even for students of a magic school, so a delinquent who did not take his studies seriously could not use them when taken by surprise. Takeshi seemed to be swallowed up by the blue sky much like the beach ball in a dolphin show.

"Eh?"

The instant of surprise created a fatal opening in the followers.

Akuto instantly moved in front of them and lightly jabbed his fist into their solar plexuses. He had held back quite a bit, but they still collapsed from pain as he appeared in front of them.

In the end, all eight of them were rolling or groaning on the ground before Takeshi fell back down.

When Takeshi finally fell, Akuto grabbed the nape of his neck with one hand and flicked his forehead with his other index finger. Takeshi's head rotated halfway around on his thick neck and his harshly shaken brain ceased functioning for just an instant. In other words, he had passed out.

Akuto casually placed Takeshi next to the other delinquents and nodded in satisfaction.

"Not killing them is fine…but won't they still hold a grudge?" asked Junko in exasperation.

"They'll at least think twice about picking a fight with me again. And I have an idea about how to deal with this afterwards."

"What's that?"

"A religion…I guess. I just have to bring back a traditional one," he explained with extreme indifference. "They lack empathy for others and don't think about the consequences. I just have to give people like that something to live for. As long as they have that, this kind of person will blindly follow it.

Those traditional religions existed for those who didn't think about anything and could not accept suffering as their own responsibility."

"Will that really work?"

Junko was taken aback by Akuto's attitude. She was still not used to how terribly cruel he could be.

"People blindly followed the current system, but now they should be able to believe in the existence of something closer to being a real god, right? After all, nothing makes sense unless we assume someone created this world of the afterlife. They just have to start studying theology."

He pulled out his student handbook and contacted Student Council President Lily.

<What? You want me to have my father create a new department in the church? And you want to be in charge of it?>

Lily's father was a high priest, so he had the authority. Based on the past data and the current governance, recreating a traditional religion would be easy.

Akuto nodded in satisfaction at finding a job for himself.

"I don't know what has happened to the concept of time here, but the education will take several years."

He spoke it like a prophecy. It was actually a prediction, but he knew he was not wrong in this.

"Several years? Won't you graduate before then?" asked Junko.

"Oh? Akuto-sama is already about to graduate. And once he does, our new life begins. We have a new home prepared, don't we?"

Fujiko turned toward Yoshie as if to urge her to speak.

"That's right. How about we get going?"

Yoshie began walking.

They boarded a train at the academy station and travelled two stations away. Yoshie entered a high-rise building not far from the center of the capital. The security on the ground floor was strict and the automatic door had a lock that only allowed those with a certain level of conduct to enter. The building contained living spaces for only a select few.

"The sixtieth floor is our home. That's the very top floor," explained Yoshie as she pressed the elevator button.

Akuto looked around the ground floor and saw a shopping mall with quite a few tenants such as a boutique, a café, and a jewelry store. A single floor was quite large.

“The entire floor?”

“It doesn’t stand out as much as a mansion and we don’t have to worry about stairs in the living space. The yard is artificial, but it has fish tanks and flower beds. It would be a nice place for pets.”

The button for the top floor was locked so only Akuto and the girls could press it. Yoshie took the lead and opened the door. It led to a modernistic space filled with straight lines which was what they were most used to as a living space.

“Our individual rooms and Akuto-kun’s room are separate. Each room has its own closet and bathroom, so they have everything we need. There’s of course a living room and there’s a courtyard, large bath, and pool as well, so we can spend our time there. That just leaves…”

As Yoshie explained the different rooms, she gained a mischievous smile and placed her hand on the door to the final room.

“The bedroom.”

It contained a luxurious rococo-style double bed with a canopy. Further in were a glass-walled shower room and a sauna. A mirror covered the ceiling and the indirect lighting caused everything to shine orange.

“What is…this?” muttered Junko while blushing.

“Not bad!” exclaimed Fujiko in a high-pitched and emotional voice. “This bedroom will belong to Akuto-sama and me, won’t it!?”

But Yoshie immediately rejected that idea.

“We all share this room.”

“We share it?”

“Yeah. We’ll all use it.”

“As in a foursome?”

“If that’s what everyone is into. I would be…fine with it I suppose. Yeah, I’m up for it.”

“I am not into that,” replied Fujiko. “I must take Akuto-sama for myself.”

“In that case, we can divide it up by time…or take turns.”

As Fujiko and Yoshie began that questionable discussion, Junko cut in while completely flustered.

“H-hey! What are you talking about!?”

“You can’t tell? We’re trying to decide our policy on reproductive activities,” answered Yoshie. “This isn’t exactly a normal situation, so we need to come to an agreement ahead of time.”

“Stop trying to act so pure,” added Fujiko. “You want him to make love to you too, don’t you?”

Both girls let out an irritated snort.

“B-but…”

Junko could not find anything to say, but she let out a shout when she noticed Akuto trying to sneak away.

“This is only happening because you are so worthless! We need to hold a proper marriage ceremony between all of us! Once we do that, I will not complain!”

That changed the look on Yoshie and Fujiko’s faces. The neon pink aura surrounding them transformed into the rose-colored aura of a maiden.

“Marriage!

“A wedding!”

“And the consummation thereof!”

“Call it a marriage ceremony!”

Spurred on by Junko, the girls headed for the living room without Akuto. Wondering what this sudden change meant, he followed, but he only found the three girls lying on the living room sofa together and watching a guide to nearby wedding halls on a mana screen. He simply could not understand what was going on, so he shrugged, returned to the bedroom, and closed the door.

That evening, a strange but (to Akuto) relaxing new life began.

During the day, he worked on his studies and on establishing the new religion he was tentatively calling the “Church of Purity”. At night, he was taken care of by the three girls who returned home at about the same time as him.

Even if he already knew them quite well, living with them meant learning of the more unexpected sides of them.

Yoshie was more sociable than he had expected and she had a habit of clinging to Fujiko and Junko as well as him. She could also be selfish and do things on a whim. When she was lost in the research she performed on the computer installed in her room, she would not come out no matter who called for her. When Fujiko had jokingly tickled the back of her neck to draw her attention, she had grown seriously angry.

Fujiko was just about what he had expected, but she also had a way of being too open with someone she trusted and it could reach the point of laziness. If she was in a good mood, she would do the cooking, laundry, cleaning, and other chores, but if she was not in the mood, she would leave it all to Junko. She would also leave snack bags and uneaten food sitting around. Not only that, she would grow angry and insist she was still planning to eat it if someone threw it away. Nevertheless, she wanted Akuto to be the perfect man and he was the type to live up to her expectations, so it was always Yoshie and Junko who got angry at her.

Junko was Junko, so her clean-freak side showed itself almost immediately. She would complain about doing all the housework herself, but she was the first to grow fed up with anything being untidy. She also could not relax unless she personally cleaned the areas they had hired people to handle, so she always ended up doing the cleaning and laundry before the hired service's next cycle had arrived. She hated eating out and she insisted on buying ingredients herself to ensure their food was nutritionally balanced. However, she did not like opening up to others, so she would always tear Fujiko and Yoshie away from Akuto when they clung to him and yet she would not take that place herself. On occasion, however, she would keep a set distance from him and breathe heavily while giving heated looks in his direction. She was something like an in-house stalker. Fujiko found this creepy and even tried to get the two of them to embrace, but she was always left sighing in exasperation when Junko would struggle and run away.

Despite the problems, Akuto enjoyed this life. After all, he could improve it by putting some effort into it. By helping Junko with the chores, he could increase his contact with her without her feeling uncomfortable, he gave Fujiko work to do beyond her studies which added order into her daily life, and he held late-night conversations with Yoshie that the other girls could not keep up with in order to distance them from sexual topics.

Normally, all this activity would have drained a man of energy, but Akuto could manage it. This allowed the days to fly by peacefully.

Their wedding was a grand event. They had argued over which religion's style to use, so they had ultimately decided to do all of them.

They rented out an event hall and the three girls appeared in wedding dresses and backed by a live orchestra. The guests were limited to friends and family, but the guest seats were still completely filled. The beauty of the three brides was enough to take Akuto's breath away.

The most excitement naturally came at the kiss of their vows. Yoshie and Fujiko gave him a smooth kiss and an enthusiastic kiss respectively, but Junko seemed to have hesitated up to that very last moment.

"I-in front of all these people?" she asked.

Fujiko said it was only natural and even Akuto told her to she should have been prepared for this.

What ultimately allowed her to make up her mind was what Akuto said next.

"I know this is your first kiss, so don't you want it to be in the best possible place?"

After that, Junko closed her eyes and quietly accepted his lips.

They finished the ceremony that used traditional eastern wedding garb and the reception went well. By the time they left by car, the sun was setting. They had no honeymoon, but they all felt on top of the world once they arrived home that night.

They had everything they could want.

They had a never-ending supply of whatever money could buy.

Even the weather was nice.

Akuto even had the love and adventure that all the rich wanted but that could not be bought.

These were golden days.

They ate, drank, laughed, grew angry, and loved each other.

The nights were the most stimulating part for someone as young as Akuto.

The three girls took turns sharing the bed with him for a night. They had drawn lots and decided on the order of Junko, Fujiko, and Yoshie.

On the first night, Junko hid her face behind her hands. They had been naked in a bed together once before, but that had been a bizarre situation in which they were forced to recreate the events of a novel in a virtual alternate dimension.

Akuto began by mentioning that.

“I poked at your flower petals with my finger, didn’t I?”

Junko laughed and finally took her hands from her face.

After exchanging a glance and smiling, an awkward silence fell.

“Are we really doing this?” asked Junko.

“I want to,” said Akuto.

With an embarrassed smile, he held her tightly in his arms.

From there, they were too preoccupied to speak. She lay below him, they tightly wrapped their arms and legs around each other, and they pressed their bodies together to the point that they could not see each other’s faces. Akuto could do nothing but feel the wetness grow on their lower parts and he wondered if he needed to perform the actions he had seen in porn. However, Junko said nothing as the tips of their mucous membranes touched, so he began to lower his hips.

But then Junko squirmed and slid up the bed. He felt holding her head would be too forceful, so he moved up along with her. When the tip touched Junko again, the slimy sensation sent a tingling down his spine.

She let out a quick, sharp breath and squirmed up the bed again. He followed once more and that wordless process repeated several times.

It finally came to an end when Junko’s head struck the headboard.

“Ow…” she said as she came back to her senses.

Akuto laughed and she gave a bitter smile.

“I-it isn’t that I’m unwilling,” she said.

She let go of his body, spread out the shifted blanket and sheets, and returned to their original position. Akuto also crawled back to his original position.

They embraced each other again and Junko gave a quick shriek. Their lower parts touched and the coldness surprised Akuto as well.

“S-so this is what it feels like. I had never thought about it.”

Their surprising wetness bewildered Junko and Akuto nodded in agreement.

“Are you ready?” he asked.

This time, she gave a small nod.

He lowered his hips and felt as if his entire body was being enveloped, but then he felt some resistance.

She let out a small moan and her arms and legs tightened around him.

He stopped moving, but she whispered to him.

“Keep going.”

He wrapped his arms around her head, let her wrap her legs around his waist, and lowered his body down.

Junko arched her back as if showing him her throat.

The theory behind time travel was one thing, but actually doing it was not difficult. Once the Brave suit’s mode was changed, he only needed to enter a number and a place and he would be taken there.

However, that proved this time travel had been used many times already and that meant it was highly likely Bouichirou was telling the truth.

<You will likely return to this spot and this instant countless times.>

—*His methods were the problem.*

As his first target, Hiroshi chose the laboratory Fujiko had found. That was the birthplace of the modern mana civilization. With all the documents they had, determining the date was easy. It also told him what documents and data he could destroy to prevent the research from advancing. Mana research had found it difficult to receive funding back then, so they could not afford even a small delay.

He entered the laboratory while still wearing the Brave suit. It had a security guard, but he had not been armed with a gun. Hiroshi knocked out the guard with a laser set to the lowest power setting.

He searched for the documents and the computer with the corresponding data on it. In this age, data was always printed out and filed, so his only option was to burn down the entire room.

There was nothing explosive in the room, so piling up the computers and documents and setting the latter alight was the most efficient method.

Hiroshi stacked up the documents and roughly placed the computers on top. He destroyed the fire alarm sensors with his monomolecular cutter before using a laser to set fire to the documents, melt the plastic computer cases, and ensure the fire was spreading.

It turned out he had to burn the remaining three rooms as well, but someone must have noticed the fire and reported it because policemen with weapons arrived while he was working on the final room.

—*Is it possible I'll have to kill them?*

He was worried, but it turned out to be a needless fear. The police were only armed with revolvers using physical bullets, so he easily handled them. He could not use a mana screen, but he set the lasers to auto and had them vaporize the bullets.

This frightened the police and they fortunately did not resist any further.

—*I don't want to go so far as to kill them.*

But then another thought came to him.

—*Wasn't I supposed to be saving mankind?*

That made him shudder.

His actions here were a crime even by his own standards. He was opposing the police and burning documents and computers. He felt these actions were not as far removed from murder as he would like to think.

—*Bouichirou probably went as far as murder.*

Sacrificing a minority would save the majority. It was a simple calculation.

However, that was a decision that was never approved of in a story.

It was possible this world was someone's story. Even so…no, for that very reason, the decision made with a simple calculation could not be approved of. That was how ethics worked. The world was filled with stories of people weighing their lover against all mankind and choosing to save their lover, but that was originally not something that should be allowed to spread.

But because the people had accepted that story, what he was doing would never be accepted by them.

Guilt brought a chill to his spine and his feeling of isolation accelerated it.

He completed his work as the police watched on and he immediately had the Brave suit return him to his original location.

"I have to give you up for a whole two days in a row!"

Fujiko clung to Akuto while speaking as if it were torture.

"Can't you think of it as 'only two days'?"

"No, it is a whole two days," she complained.

She lay on the bed wearing the black lingerie she had prepared for this day and she spread her arms toward him with sparkles in her eyes.

She acted like someone who was perfectly accustomed to it all, but he knew she had grilled Junko after her turn.

“What did it feel like when he made love to you?” she had asked.

“His you-know-what had to have been pretty formidable,” Yoshie had added.

“How long did the pain last? …No, this is not about my experience. I am only asking because Akuto-sama’s is special.”

Junko had of course not been able to answer them and their questioning had eventually become something akin to torture.

And if Fujiko had done that, she was clearly not as experienced as she pretended to be.

However, that did not mean Akuto could relax. When he had done it with Junko, both of them had been too overwhelmed to do anything extra and they had not even considered it, but this time was different. He was worried about putting too much of an unnecessary burden on Fujiko.

His hands crept along her body as they embraced and he spoke up unexpectedly.

“There are a surprising number of differences between different people’s bodies.”

“What?” protested Fujiko. “P-please do not mention other girls right now!”

“S-sorry. I just felt you…um…have a much more feminine body.”

Fujiko had a unique softness to her that made him feel like he could sink down into it forever. This contrasted the resilience of Junko’s body that seemed to press back out from within. He decided he needed to use different methods when touching their bodies.

He was unsure if his comment had been effective or if he should have kept his mouth shut, but Fujiko did not resist any further.

He leaned his body weight on her large body and his upper body was enveloped by the sensation of plunging into water and being covered in lukewarm oil.

He touched every part of Fujiko’s body and his touches were more of a groping than a caress. He focused on the parts of her that produced lovely cries from her and she soon brought her hands to his body.

Her fingers traced from his side to his hips. She extremely awkwardly held his lower part in her hand and moved it in order to guide it to its rightful place. After he adjusted his body's position and lowered his hips, he felt a strange new sensation as if his entire body were tightly enveloped by mucous membranes.

The two of them trembled in ecstasy, but it was Fujiko who began moving first.

With a suggestive smile, she thrust up from below.

He had supposedly eliminated the source of the mana civilization, but the past had not changed.

No, it technically had changed.

"The origin of the mana civilization changed?" asked Hiroshi.

"It is not that the laboratory's data was salvaged," answered Bouichirou. "A researcher who was off duty received some data by email and managed to use that to develop mana on his own. That is now the moving tale told in history books."

Bouichirou gave a thin smile. It looked like a devilish smile yet it also looked kind. Either way, the smile showed he had known this would happen.

That enraged Hiroshi.

"The security should have made it impossible for that researcher to receive the data by email!"

Bouichirou shrugged.

"Yes. I am well aware of that. But no one has any way of knowing that now. That's how history works."

"Do you really have to act like the story was fabricated?'

"But it was fabricated. It really was."

"Really?"

That unexpected statement caused Hiroshi's eyes to open wide.

"Yes. Only those involved can truly know history. We were not there, so all we can know is the historical information that someone could have forcibly rewritten."

"That means anything could be made into the truth!" shouted Hiroshi.

“There is no such thing as truth. At least, there isn’t if this world really is a story.”

“Then does relate to the theory of time you explained to me before?”

“Yes. If you change something, something else is inserted at an appropriate point somewhere else. It is changed by someone.”

It was hard to believe, but Bouichirou had no reason to lie as Hiroshi would be able to confirm for himself whether it was true or not.

If that “someone” was the Law of Identity, she was being quite cruel. If her intent was to prevent the world from being changed, she would be sending the world toward destruction. If her intent was to prevent the world from being destroyed, it would be best for her to support Hiroshi’s attempts.

While thinking on that, Hiroshi felt a dark emotion welling up within him.

If he killed someone or changed history in an important and definitive way, it was possible not even the Law of Identity could prevent it. He was reluctant to kill, but it would not be a problem if this truly was the afterlife. (He had no proof it was, though.) He would only be changing the timing in which that person arrived and it made murder feel less definitive. Also, if he could end it all with a single sacrifice…

“By the way, did you ever succeed in killing an important individual?” asked Hiroshi as a challenge.

Bouichirou understood what he meant and gave a strange smile.

However, the two of them did not exchange any more words.

When Yoshie’s turn came, she had to have been quite nervous, but it seemed her curiosity won out.

She stared intently at and touched Akuto’s body. She especially enjoyed the way that one specific part of him reacted.

“I already had all the knowledge, but seeing it in person really is different.”

She was wrapped in a blanket with only her hands and head sticking out while Akuto sat naked on the bed and she toyed with the front of his body.

“Do you really have to toy with it like that?” complained Akuto.

“But I have to know all about it,” she calmly answered.

Hearing that, he could not help but grow a bit mean.

“In that case, we should both get to know all about each other.”

He reached around to her back and pulled away the blanket.

“Hyah.”

With her white skin exposed, she squirmed and tried to hide herself, but he pulled the blanket around himself such that it pulled her forward to embrace him.

“I expected you to be the type who wouldn’t get embarrassed when she’s naked.”

“Of course I’m going to be embarrassed given the situation. …Try to be more sensitive.”

She blushed, but he did not hold back. He placed the blanket over both of their heads and held down her legs.

“I already had all the knowledge, but seeing it in person really is different.”

He repeated her line as he placed his hand on her corresponding body part.

“Fine, I’m sorry for saying that.”

She squirmed, but she could not hope to match his strength.

“All I’m doing is rubbing between your toes.”

“Are you going to claim that’s between my two big toes?”

“It’s an old joke, I know. But I’m surprised how ready you are down here.”

He laughed and embraced her face-to-face.

“You’re just plain mean,” she said.

“Mean? I’ve been called pure evil.”

Without giving her time to prepare, he lowered his body down.

She let out a wordless cry that was a mixture of surprise and a different feeling.

Hiroshi shot down the black magician woman who was fleeing with a baby named Akuto.

After making sure Akuto was dead, he averted his gaze from the corpse of the infant that had been crushed by the fall.

Chapter 3: Many Possibilities that are Currently Absent

The days flowed by.

It was unclear what meaning the passage of time held in the afterlife, but the seasons changed and they counted the passage of five years.

Akuto and the others had supposedly grown older, but they remained the same as before. Akuto may have already transcended the concept of aging, but the others also did not age or grow as time went on.

All the students graduated from Constant Magic Academy and it shut down, but the facility continued on as a community center. The teachers either remained to work there or began working in other public positions.

The city expanded and people's relationships somewhat changed. Even so, the people making up the city remained the same because no one aged or died.

More importantly, no way of leaving the world presented itself.

"I do not think it is good for my condition the following day. But…um…it is not that I do not like it."

Junko spoke to Akuto in bed.

He had made love to the three girls countless times since the first time, but it did not remain fresh and surprising forever. For about a year, he had remained active every night. The three girls had two day gaps between their turns, so their desire had never waned. But by the second year, they had begun spending more nights speaking calmly.

"Has your condition ever been a problem?" asked Akuto. "Oh, but I'm just asking out of curiosity. It isn't like I'm dead set on doing it tonight or anything."

He and Junko exchanged a glance.

"Well, no. I suppose it has not," she answered after some thought. "I do gain weight, though."

"Some people think of who they are tomorrow as a different person from who they are today."

"Yes, that is true. Are you asking why that change does not occur here?"

“Yes. I know that some percentage of our cells is replaced by the following day, but I don’t know if that happens here. Still, our relationship has progressed…and changed a little.”

He leaned over and kissed Junko. After intertwining their tongues for a bit, they moved their faces apart once more.

“I said we aren’t doing it tonight,” said Junko while narrowing her eyes.

“You’ve gotten a lot less shy. That’s fine by me of course, but you wouldn’t even let me kiss you until we came here.”

Junko’s expression stiffened.

“You are not going to say you do not like me anymore, are you?”

“Sorry if I worried you. Try to remember that falling even further in love is also a change in one’s feelings. At any rate, our bodies stay the same while our feelings alone change.”

His expression was perfectly serious and Junko nodded.

“That is true, but why are you mentioning this?”

“I’ve gradually become more and more interested in what this world really is.”

“Stop that.”

She gave a nervous look, but it appeared to be a forced expression meant to be shown to Akuto.

He realized that and shook his head.

“I understand, but I’m scared too.”

“Scared?”

“I think happiness is what we have here. We have worthwhile work, people accept us, we love, and we are loved.”

“My feelings are not going to change,” Junko quickly assured him.

“I know that. That isn’t what I meant.”

“Are you afraid of having this happiness continue?”

“That isn’t it either. I’m afraid of eternity. We will no longer die and our feelings will not change. In other words, everything is already over for us.”

He bit his lip as if finding this difficult to say.

“Over?”

“If we continue like this, it won’t create anything new. I’m trying to rehabilitate the delinquents, but I’m using an old method and their actions fall within my imagination to a disturbing degree. In other words, there’s almost nothing left for me to do.”

“But you said your work is worthwhile.”

“I did, but it’s very simple work for me. I don’t grow tired of it, but none of it is new to me.”

“But what do you mean it is over for us? Are you actually afraid of *not* dying?”

“Sort of. Hypothetically…well, we might actually have it for real. Anyway, if you had eternal life, what would you do?”

Junko tilted her head at that.

“I never thought about it, but it would certainly be boring. Is that what you mean?”

“It’s similar to boredom, but not quite,” began Akuto as if a dam had broken. “I’ve been thinking about it for a long time because of the power I gained. I wondered if I was afraid of eternal life because of the boredom, but that isn’t it. What I’m afraid of is being forced to continue when everything is already over for me. I’d be forced to continue talking despite having nothing left to talk about. I’d be forced to continue writing despite having nothing left to write about. The delinquent rehabilitation is the same. They’ll eventually start talking the way I taught them to, but that’s nothing more than being an echo of me. Even romance is similar. We become one and thus become inseparable. That is an ending and yet we must continue on afterwards.”

“You want to know why you should continue? If our lives continue, why not take it easy and do so? What else can we do? Akuto, you are acting weird.”

She held his hand worriedly and he looked her in the eye.

“If we are the characters of a story, we’ve already reached the ending. If we want to do anything else – even live a peaceful life – we have to do something. We must search for the reason we must do something. We must search for that truth.”

“But why must we do that? No! For whose sake must we do that?”

Anger had almost completely filled her voice, but Akuto still nodded calmly.

“That is something else we have to search out.”

She said nothing more as if she had given up.

Junko had already left by the time he woke up the next morning. He entered the living room and found that Yoshie was gone and that Fujiko alone lay lazily on the sofa.

“It sounded like you really went at it last night,” she said sarcastically.

“Stop that. Besides, you’re always a lot more-…”

She cut him off with a serious comment.

“I know. What were you arguing about?”

He sat next to her and explained the situation and she used the chance to rest her head on him.

“Are you still worried about saving the world?”

“To be honest, my focus on that has faded. I was on the verge of forgetting about Keena, Korone, and Hiroshi.”

He brushed his fingers through her hair and she skillfully adjusted her head’s position to let him.

“That just shows how happy you are.”

“Even my memories are fading. It’s like we’re stuck here in eternity.”

“Do you have a problem with eternity?”

“I think I do. While living in eternity, we need to find the meaning behind that eternity and bring this ending…to an end.”

“That’s a bit confusing, but I suppose so. Now, how about we get started?”

“Get started with what?”

“First, we can determine whether this is a dream or reality by touching each other’s bodies.”

Her hand reached around his waist.

“Those actions may be part of what has caused my memories to fade.”

He stood up and told her to leave the house.

Puzzled, she followed him and he climbed to the apartment building’s roof. They could see the entire city from there.

“Is there a reason to look at the city?” she asked.

“No.” He shook his head. “But I wanted to see into the distance. As far into the distance as I can.”

He produced a mana screen that displayed exactly what he himself could see.

“Your skill in magic certainly hasn’t waned.”

“I want to stay at the top of my game. Anyway, my vision is infinite so long as mana exists.”

“But when we were alive, there was no mana outside imperial territory. Plus, the earth was round, so you could see no better than a telescope on the surface and no better than a normal person in space.”

Akuto nodded in agreement with Fujiko’s explanation and pointed into the distance.

“But this world is completely filled with mana. The mana never ends.”

He extended his vision into the distance much like a camera zooming in. Fujiko could see the corresponding change on the screen.

“Eh? This is quite impressive.”

Her eyes opened wide as the zooming footage left the city, passed the horizon beyond it, and continued even further. Travelling past the horizon meant it reached the sky.

The sky expanded until it filled the screen and his vision showed nothing but the color blue. When he finally passed through the clouds, the screen turned white for an instant and then the darkness quickly grew. His vision reached space and ultimately vanished.

“It vanished?”

The instant after Fujiko said that, his vision filled with darkness once more and the previous series of scenes appeared in reverse. The earth expanded on the screen and it finally grew blue. And…

“Our backs!”

Sure enough, the screen displayed Akuto and Fujiko’s backs. She thought about what that meant if it really was equivalent to what Akuto could see.

“This is us right now?”

She waved her right hand and the Fujiko in the image did the same.

“Yes. This is what I’m seeing right now. I noticed this a while back.”

He moved his left arm.

“And what does it mean?” she asked.

“If the world we lived in was fictional, then the afterlife is also fictional. I started to think about what differentiated the two worlds and the answer I found was the presence or absence of an external wall,” he explained. “The world of the living had an external wall, but this world does not. No matter

which three-dimensional direction you move in, you will return to your starting point. You can continue forever, but the space is finite."

"I understand the concept, but what does it mean?"

"I don't know." He shook his head. "But I can say a few things with no real proof. They may both be fictional, but there is a fiction with something outside and there is a fiction with only the inside. And in the latter case, some are the protagonists and some are the background characters. I think whatever we do will be successful…while in this world at least."

He gave a mischievous sidelong glance toward Fujiko.

She blushed and gave a small bitter smile with the corners of her mouth.

"So you realized I was still thinking of ruling the world."

"We're a better pair than anyone else realizes," he said. "Even if the others haven't caught on, I know what you're up to. You've approached within a step away from constructing a governmental structure with me at the center, haven't you?"

"I have. How about it? Will you sit on the throne or will you let it end with nothing more than a wealthy life? You can do whatever you want."

"And you know I won't do either. This is just an elaborate prank. You find it more fun when a fortune built up to be squandered is destroyed in some exciting way."

He smiled.

"Oh, dear. I'm happy you understand everything, but it's still disappointing that you knew what I was planning."

She smiled as well.

"I'm going to go a step beyond that. How about I crush this world in my grasp?"

"Eh?"

He had spoken so casually that it caught Fujiko off guard.

"This is a finite world and it's filled with mana. Those are the rules, and that means…"

He stretched out his hand and bent his fingers as if training his grip.

The world began to creak.

"Ahh," cried Fujiko in surprise.

The city shook, the air vibrated, and the pressure caused everything to groan.

The earth also shook. The earth would not normally be filled with mana, but this finite space was entirely filled with mana and thus the earth itself was made of mana.

Akuto essentially held that finite space in his grasp.

Fujiko realized he was crushing the very world into a smaller size.

“Akuto-sama…”

She quietly called his name in fear.

This was no different from suicide.

This was a world where they did not die and could not die, but would everything return to nothingness if he crushed that very world? His expression made it clear he had already resolved himself to answering that question.

His expression was calm as he quietly clenched his fist.

Seeing that, Fujiko simply took his other hand in her own.

The earth ripped up as if gathering in the center of the space, the ocean approached the city as it raged like a tsunami, the buildings cracked, and the people began floating up into the air.

Pressure reached the entire planet as if the earth had sunk into the depths of an ocean.

This was an ending of the world that no one had seen before.

Fujiko clung to Akuto and he wrapped an arm around her shoulders, but then static suddenly came from the mana screen.

That static was soon followed by a voice.

“No! That ending isn’t allowed!”

The words were oddly accented and Akuto recognized the voice.

He turned toward the mana screen he had abandoned and he found a blonde version of Keena.

“Keena,” he muttered.

This was the other Keena that had appeared as a distortion when Keena aka the Law of Identity had reset the world.

Akuto and the others had worked to erase her existence because she was not meant to exist.

“Why?”

This unexpected development stopped his hand.

“I won’t let you end things like that!” repeated the blonde Keena. “I disappeared because I was satisfied! But all of you aren’t truly satisficed, are you!?”

Akuto stopped moving and prepared to respond to Keena, but the mana screen disappeared.

“Was that just an illusion?” asked Fujiko. “No, it couldn’t be.”

Based on Akuto’s reaction, she was certain it was not an illusion.

He loosened his grip, the world stopped shrinking, and it slowly began returning to normal. The scene had been quite a spectacle, but the people gave no sign of noticing. They all walked through the city as if that scene of near destruction had never happened.

“We aren’t truly satisfied?”

Fujiko looked at Akuto and he looked back before closing his eyes.

“It seems so.”

“I had known this from the beginning. I had wondered if we were not actually satisfying you.”

She kissed him and stepped through the door from the roof ahead of him.

He stared into the sky for a while before doing the same. He passed Yoshie as she came to the roof and she gave him a disappointed look.

“I’m a girl too, you know? So I don’t like hearing that. I came here because I detected a distortion, but this is what I find.”

“Sorry.”

“I’m not sure how to respond to an apology either. But is there anything you want me to think about?”

She shrugged her shoulders in resignation.

“Yes. Please think about how to leave this place.”

He looked her directly in the eye as he made the request.

“This is going to get lengthy. Let’s talk in my room.”

She urged him to return to their apartment.

Brave felt utterly defeated.

He had kept count up to the 35th time.

He had killed Akuto more times than that, but nothing had changed. Not a thing.

Bouichirou had stopped hiding his pity partway through and Brave had clearly felt the sympathy of one who had been through the exact same thing.

“You should stop. Surely you know that.”

“I know all too well that someone is maliciously refusing to let me change history,” replied Brave in despair.

“That’s right. For some reason, this flow of events is not allowed to change.”

“But I’m one of the people who caused history to head down that path.”

“Yes. Even your futile struggles to change history are a part of that history. That is how it seems to work.” Bouichirou sighed. “I realized after I died, that my death was already decided.”

“Then I’m doomed to continually suffer in the same way? I have to repeat this unrewarded murder again and again as long as my will remains? And all of it is meaningless?”

Brave asked despite knowing the answer.

“Exactly.” Bouichirou nodded. “That is undoubtedly your role.”

“My role? So I have to work for the sake of someone’s plot? Why?”

“In this world…no, that is not a good way of putting it. In any world, there is no one with free will. Even you are doing this because you desire the result that will satisfy you, but those thoughts are in line with the ‘story’. What is happiness? If your stomach is full and a member of the opposite sex stands beside you, then you are satisfied. Even if that member of the opposite sex dies, the feeling of loss will not last too long. It does not create a gap that cannot be filled by another. Even those who seek out the finest foods despite their full stomach will settle for the food nearby when their stomach grows empty. There is no difference between biological satisfaction and happiness. If it were not for the ‘story’, that is. Many things are given value in a religious way: love, bloodline, success, one’s view of life, etc. But in a purely biological perspective, such things should not be given value. Stories support the human intellect, but they also infect it like a virus.”

“But we managed to resist it. We realized that and we’re trying to destroy the natural story. We know the history reaching this point is unnatural. The characters have realized they live in an artificial story, so the story has grown unstable!”

Brave’s eyes sparkled at this new discovery, but Bouichirou’s expression did not change.

“That is the kind of story this is.”

“What?”

“This is a story of divulging what stories are. The convenient deus ex machina does not exist simply as catharsis. It appears in order to tell us what it is we perceive as a story and to help us believe that the story is fictional. That god tells us of the pleasures and limits of the story. And thus we ourselves have become the deus ex machina.”

Bouichirou pointed at himself and then at Brave.

“We are the deus ex machina?”

“Rewriting history can save one from any problem. Even an unfortunate death or a terrible failure.”

“So…the deus ex machina hasn’t been forbidden. It just will fail?”

“Yes. And that leads to a single conclusion.”

“I get it. We’re not the protagonist.”

Brave was dumbfounded.

“That’s right.” Bouichirou disinterestedly dug into the ground with his foot. “And yet your role as a side character has yet to end. After all, Brave is now your only name and you have not lost that title. Most likely, all you are allowed now is to display bravery once everything has been lost.”

“And yet I’m still a side character, huh? So who’s the protagonist?”

He asked despite knowing the answer.

“That is of course the one who divulged several layers of fiction in the story. Most likely, the ending will come when he brings an end to the story exactly as the story dictates. The role of a demon king is to destroy the world, is it not? If a story does not allow the prince and princess to marry and live happily ever after, it must end with the world ending.”

“In other words, I’m important?” asked Akuto.

He still could not believe it.

“I think so.” Yoshie’s expression was completely serious. “You will bring an end to the world. What exactly that means gets tricky, though.”

“So whatever it means, I have to settle things?”

She nodded.

“The blonde Keena disappeared when she was satisfied, so you must be satisfied as well.”

“I get that, but what does it mean for me to be satisfied?”

“You live in a fiction yet you hate fiction. You have a natural urge to divulge fictions, so you will do so one after another. You destroyed the system closing us in, but the next system activated. The fiction has multiple layers. It is in an infinite retreat. It’s like a hell that continues on and on forever, so it isn’t an easy thing to deal with.”

Yoshie clung to him from behind as he sat in a chair.

“Quick question.”

“What? I thought we were having a serious discussion.”

“I’m asking *because* this is a serious discussion. Why are you hugging me from behind?”

“I’m indulging in my reward for playing the role of a side character. Specifically, the role of one of the three goddesses.”

“But this isn’t exactly a sexy topic of discussion.”

“Won’t you look more like a villain if you’re stroking a girl while having a normal conversation?”

“Am I still a villain?”

She delighted as he tickled her cheek.

“Hee hee. If this upcoming role of yours isn’t that of a villain, what is it?”

“Again, what am I supposed to do to make myself satisfied?”

“You need to bring this world to an end…but that’s a tricky thing. First of all, we have to explain what exactly this world is.” She began her explanation. “The afterlife changes based on our…no, mostly based on your thoughts. It’s as if it were made for us. That means this world can take on any form.”

“I understand that much.”

“No, you don’t really understand what it means for it to take on any form. Are you familiar with the concept of possible worlds?”

“Possible worlds?”

Akuto “recalled” a term he did not previously known as if scanning through his brain and retrieving the data.

“I see. It’s a thought experiment where you assume a world where anything is possible and thus say anything logically feasible can happen.”

“Yes. In other words, anything that can be described in text can happen. That also tells us the limits of this world: anything that cannot be described cannot happen.”

Yoshie then began explaining the concept of possible worlds which was difficult to grasp just from the database information.

For example, the two statements “an elephant flew through the sky” and “Hitler visited Paris in the year 2000 AD” were both impossible in reality, but they worked in writing. If elephants were flying creatures and if Hitler had not died, they could occur even in reality. They were true in a world that could have been. In that case, it became clear that near infinite possibilities were contained within the world. They could even be seen as existing as infinite parallel worlds.

“You will create all of those logically possible worlds,” said Yoshie as if giving an order.

“All of them?” he asked back in astonishment.

“What remains after that will be your own will. You will see all worlds and choose for yourself.”

“I suppose I should search for the possibility of saving the world in this world where I can do anything. If I don’t, we may never escape this place.”

“In that case, I think you should start right away.” She produced a mana screen and displayed a model of history. “The data you can view is a copy of that from the world just before it was destroyed, but you can use that to calculate back and construct all possibilities.”

“But I feel like the worlds I would create would fairly ridiculous,” he said.

“That’s fine,” she replied. “Even the ridiculous worlds are a possibility.”

Akuto then decided to bring out those possibilities himself.

The world let out a groan.

Only a small number of people noticed it, but Brave and Bouichirou were of course two such people.

“What is this?” asked Brave.

Even as he asked, he felt the world losing its shape.

“This is the instant in which the world is altered,” explained Bouichirou. “I felt this on a small scale whenever you travelled back in time. The one doing it does not notice, though.”

“Then the one altering it now is…”

“Needless to say, it is the demon king. Activate the suit. We need to escape this.”

“Escape?”

He activated the suit’s time travel functionality and expanded the range to bring Bouichirou with him.

“We will erase ourselves from this space. The demon king is freely altering the world of the afterlife, but we will remove ourselves as factors in that.”

“You can explain later.”

Brave travelled to a time period he had not visited before. In order to avoid being seen, he travelled to a tall mountain peak during a period when mankind had yet to develop magical civilization and was not even using electromagnetic signals.

“I figured you wouldn’t want to be cold, so I chose a rocky mountain of only 2000 meters during the summer.”

All they could see were rocky mountains and a forest down below. The taller mountains had snow on their peaks, but this sunny peak was warm.

“Thank you. The weather might be better here than in the afterlife. This cool wind is quite nice.”

Bouichirou sat on a nearby rock.

“So you say the demon king has altered the afterlife?” asked Brave with hands on his hips.

“He alters it all the time, but this time he altogether erased it.”

“Erased it? You mean he’s resetting it to redo it?”

“Yes. It seems the afterlife was a world the demon king has free control over. He likely realized that thanks to the knowledge of those around him.”

Bouichirou sounded fairly bewildered.

“Free control? I thought that place granted everyone’s wishes and his will was simply the strongest.”

Brave was suspicious because the dead had been there before the demon king.

“It is possible the memories of those people were only created once the demon king arrived. It would be impossible for them to be aware of it, however.”

Brave accepted that explanation, but his expression did not change.

“That’s based on the theory that no one would realize it if the world and all our memories were created five minutes ago. I’m familiar with that, but if it’s true…what does that make us?”

“That is a natural question, but it is a difficult one to answer as we are on the inside.” Bouichirou chose his words carefully. “However, if we assume the entire universe was created by the Law of Identity, it means we are fictional beings, as is the demon king.”

“That’s what you were talking about before, isn’t it?”

“The afterlife exists on the inside and we can think of it as existing inside the demon king.”

“Yeah,” agreed Brave. “I get it. We all died and were resurrected. But it was the demon king that resurrected us.”

“That is how I understand it. The world has been reconstructed as data. Just as the former computer gods attempted to do.”

“Then why did he erase it and try to redo it? If he’s on the level of a god, why didn’t he accept the world he created?”

“Based on his words, I assume it be because that was a world of an eternal ending.”

Bouichirou nodded as if to say he understood the feeling.

“I don’t really get it.”

Brave had been frowning this whole time.

“He realized there is no story in satisfying his own desires.”

“I realized that before he did. Otherwise, I would have been living with my girlfriend in this world.”

“We cannot do that. That is simply the type of existence we are.”

Hearing that, Brave finally changed his expression.

“Existence? You explained that earlier, didn’t you?”

“If the people of the afterlife are fictional characters, we alone exist. The two of us and the demon king.”

“The two of us and the demon king?”

Brave was taken aback.

“We may have been chosen by the Law of Identity. We were chosen as side characters, but we were still given important parts to play.”

Bouichirou’s expression was oddly calm.

“I do feel like destiny is playing a hand in things. And we weren’t wrapped up in what just happened.”

“The demon king is redoing the story itself and he will likely study the result by using the people…no, the characters of the afterlife.”

That was Bouichirou’s conclusion and Brave accepted it.

“But there’s no way he can do that.”

“Yes. As he did not succeed the first time, he cannot succeed the second time unless someone else’s power is at work.”

“And that’s what we’ll do?” asked Brave in shock.

Bouichirou nodded.

“You have already made up your mind, haven’t you? It is only natural that it be the hero who saves the world.”

“But how?”

“There is a way. We will enter the demon king’s world. We will enter, but we will interfere without being incorporated into it. We can travel on the path of history that the Law of Identity has created. Of course, there will be a sacrifice.”

“A sacrifice?”

“*We* will be interfering with the demon king’s world, but our individual personalities will not.”

Bouichirou seemed to have made up his mind about something and that statement sounded ominous to Brave.

“What do you mean by that? What sacrifice?”

“Just like the Law of Identity, the demon king does not handle the people as individual personalities. The people all have an internal side, but in the story, all else is nothing more than a collection of elements unneeded for a personality. That will remain the same even after he reorganizes the world.”

“I see.” Having caught on, Brave took a deep sigh. “We’ll be treated as a combined personality playing the role of the hero.”

“Yes. It is most likely for the Law of Identity’s convenience, but that is how the characters work in this world.”

“I don’t want that to happen,” said Brave.

But then Bouichirou vanished before his eyes.

Brave closed his eyes as if scrutinizing the memories, consciousness, and knowledge that came flowing in.

He took several calm breaths and finally looked up into the sky.

“I understand. We have to put on a show for the Law of Identity.”

Chapter 4: Countless Universes

Opening up all possibilities may have been a mistake.

The space itself was finite and the characters were finite, but the combinations were infinite. Opening up the possibilities was not just a concept. It actually released the walls of the world that supposedly existed within Akuto.

This was similar to further universes being born within him.

The props used naturally extended beyond him.

In other words, even the extra-universal gods became possibilities in the story.

As a result, all stories fell into chaos.

What is it called when stories fall into chaos?

The answer was included in a certain story from the past: the Tower of Babel.

Until then, it could be said that the story was shared by all. They had all been playing a part in that story and thus the world had not been allowed to interfere with the stories other than Akuto's.

So what if the people ceased to share the story?

That led to chaos.

The extra-universal gods all contained their own unique stories and were thus the protagonists of those stories. Those multiple protagonists had tried to advance their stories in the same space.

That may have caused a great disturbance, but it was not conflict. After all, the "weak" stories existed there in addition to the "strong" stories that attempted take the lead. The weak yet large ones ran everyday life. The strong yet small ones ran the oddities of life.

The concepts that explained the world's structure and made people aware of their identity were large, but they had mostly blended into everyday life to the point of not being noticed. The stories of individuals' lives were carved deeply into people's hearts, but they naturally went no further than that individual.

Individuals.

It was only now that mankind truly became “individuals”. Even if they could speak to each other, no kind of relationship could be formed if they did not share the same stories. The relationships of friends, enemies, and even strangers could not be established.

When the possibilities were infinite, stories instantly became impossible.

Countless isolated individuals were formed.

First person.

Even so, stories…no, something even before that began.

I slept in darkness. No, I simply lay in darkness. I had given up. I did nothing.

I heard a voice.

It was distant. Or was it close? I could not tell.

Who was the voice calling for? Me? Someone else?

I had no way of finding out. It was even possible I had been the one to utter it.

It was possible I could confirm the existence of time for as long as the voice lasted. But it had no units. It was permanent. There was no guarantee the same word was not being repeated again and again. Even if a bell continued ringing for all eternity, there were no words to indicate a single, unique ringing of the bell. Which ring was it? Based on what division? In which eternity?

I decided to assume the voice was mine.

A story still had not been established. There was not even solitude here. After all, the first person was all that existed.

I produced sound.

There was sound.

I produced sound in order to speak.

There was speech.

There was language.

The correct answer could not be found.

It had no meaning.

It was not wrong or right.

It was meaninglessness. It was mistaken. It was a failure. Nothing existed there.

I moved my body.

There was movement.

Outside and inside. That division just barely existed.

There was movement.

Where to? Inside the space or outside the space? Heading inside led to nothingness and heading outside led to nothingness, but it was still a division. Even if a bell continued ringing for all eternity, there were no words to indicate a single, unique ringing of the bell. Which ring was it? Based on what division? In which eternity?

Even so, I counted.

I made a division.

The divisions increased.

I separated the heavens from the earth.

I moved.

I could move.

I could move the earth.

I stood. I stood using bones and the muscles of my back.

I hurt. But the pain was not everywhere. The pain was inside, but it was not outside.

I cried out.

It was meaninglessness. It was mistaken. It was a failure. That was all I had.

That mistaken noise was the only place a voice could be found. That error was all that was inside. The pain alone was there.

It was not there. I could not be sure. Mistakes were all I had.

So I made mistakes.

I made more mistakes.

I did whatever I could to make mistakes.

I made mistakes with a powerful will.

I made mistakes again and again.

And that led to…nothing.

I looked.

I mistook what I saw.

I mistook more of what I saw.

I did whatever I could to mistake what I saw.

I mistook what I saw with a powerful will.

I mistook what I saw again and again.

There was a mistake there.

I could see it.

I could see you.

Second person.

You stood in the light. No, you stood still in the light. You were there. You did nothing.

You heard a voice.

It was distant.

It was calling out to someone. You? Someone else?

You made a division between you and others, between here and there.

You decided to assume the voice came from “there”.

It may have been a story. You may have been solitary. After all, the voice may have come from someone other than you. After all, the second person existed.

You produced sound.

There was sound.

You produced sound in order to speak.

There was speech.

There was language.

The correct answer could not be found.

It had meaning.

It could also be mistaken.

You cried out.

It was meaningful. It was mistaken. It was a failure. You had all that.

That mistaken noise was the only place a voice could be found. That error was everywhere. The pain was there.

Mistakes were all you had.

So you made mistakes.

You made more mistakes.

You did whatever you could to make mistakes.

You made mistakes with a powerful will.

You made mistakes again and again.

And that led to…a story.

With that, reality became reality.

A story was needed to perceive reality because that was where a relationship with another was found.

But to reconstruct the story possibilities, Akuto needed a period of time bordering on the infinite. After all, he had to test all possible stories.

Even so, the stories immediately grew complex. In modern times, the number of stories grew explosively. That was because machines and cities became new elements for the stories.

However, the most troublesome part of the work was the elements brought in by the extra-universal gods. That included things not possessed by the Law of Identity.

Akuto fought with those extra-universal gods a few times.

Sometimes he won.

A story was created in which Akuto attended an academy in an unnamed alternate world. He was dominated by Fujiko and he struggled to help her take over the world. It ended with Fujiko's world domination never coming to fruition and the two of them never even kissing. He finished testing that possibility.

Sometimes the extra-universal gods won.

Akuto was in Dresden on February 13, 1945. The Allies performed a completely meaningless bombing and he was caught in the firestorm along with Junko. He was badly injured yet did not die, but he had watch helpless as Junko died before his eyes. Afterwards, he lived by standing in the city as a wounded soldier and begging for money from people, but he eventually died of malnutrition. That possibility ended there.

Akuto was born with the mysterious power to see ghosts. He used that power to work with a ghost version of Korone and resolve incidents related to complex human relationships. That story had no ending. Tens of thousands of stories were inspected and the testing of that possibility ended once they had all been completed.

Korea, July 1950. Members of the Bodo League were gathered from neighboring areas and killed in a cobalt mine of the former Imperial Japanese Army. They were killed because they were thought to be communists, but the league had actually been created to reeducate communists. Not only that, to increase the number of converts, people were given jobs and other incentives for naming themselves, so most of them were villagers who knew nothing of communism. Almost none of them were actual communists who were working with North Korea. The cobalt mine was chosen in order to bury the bodies. Akuto was killed there as one of the converts. What frightened him most before he died was that the Korean police assisting in the killing did not even know what communism was.

Yoshie was reincarnated in a different world and retained her memories of her previous life as a modern person. The other world's science was at the level of the middle ages, so she did great things with her scientific abilities. This story's conclusion was not a story, so the test of the possibility ended quickly. This was because he was unable to deny the value of finally affirming the modern.

Junko ran away from home. She was a delinquent, so her family did not call the police to search for her. But as she wandered alone on the streets at night, she was abducted by a van carrying multiple thugs. They got her to tell them her situation and they were delighted to hear no one would be searching for her. They drugged her, raped her, and abandoned her in the mountains. Either they had drugged her too much or she simply ran out of

strength before finding her way out of the mountains because she died there. The body was later found, but the criminals were never arrested.

A ninja arrived before Akuto, a normal boy. Junko, the ninja, was beautiful, but she had been raised in a rural area and had no knowledge of normal life. Her arrival brought chaos to the peaceful city. He attempted tens of thousands of variations on this story, but that was not enough and he proved that he could continue doing so almost without end. For that reason, he ended the investigation.

Fujiko was born as the daughter of a well-off family, but her parents loved flashy things and neglected her. Despite having plenty of money, they were oddly intent on raising her themselves. As if it were normal, they abused Fujiko before she was old enough to understand what was happening. She had no one but her parents to rely on and she possessed no concept of god, so she continued adoring the parents who hurt her and that fact actually frightened those parents. The actual killing was carried out by her father. He swung her by her feet and slammed her into the wall. Her skull was split open and she died. Her parents paid off a doctor who was a childhood friend to hide what had happened. A year later, her parents had completely forgotten about their daughter.

Akuto developed supernatural powers that only appeared in girls and transferred into a girl's school for training supernatural powers. He was the only boy in the entire school.

At that point, Akuto ended the story creation.

He had decided it was all meaningless.

The stories were developing, but the ones he created were nothing more than projections of his longing for a ridiculous world where the pleasant things would continue forever.

Most likely, he would have no choice but to call that a variation of the ultimate form of a story. If one focused on an age of limited resources, they could even find stories that were nothing but eating one's fill. In every age, people wished to interact with others who were more fortunate.

On the other hand, the stories created by the extra-universal gods were intended to destroy his desires. Also, its outer surface as a story was

hidden, so it was shown as if it were the truth. That too was a final shape of a story.

He had already used millennia on this, but he began to have more than just a suspicion that the stories were hiding within humans.

To keep the story more flat, he prepared an infinite surface, chairs, a table, drinks, and a few fruits. Even that was enough to create a story, but it would keep the story to a minimum.

People could only perceive reality as a story and they would search for the ending of that story. That ending would be the end of reality. It would also be the end of the flow of time.

The story made clear attempts to resist. The story seemed to be making attempts to survive even if it meant destroying mankind.

Akuto called a guest to the space containing the infinite surface. There were few personalities that were not influenced by him and there had only been one person from whom he had been able to receive advice.

Hiroshi was there with a sheepish smile.

“Is this the first time we’ve spoken like this?” asked Hiroshi.

He was not wearing the Brave suit, but he was definitely still Brave.

“We’ve been apart for a very long time,” said Akuto.

“I never really thought about speaking with you as an equal.”

“Perhaps not, but I feel like we both realized this moment was coming.”

“I didn’t come here because you called for me. I chose to transfer to this time and space because I knew this moment was coming. For me it’s been a few months, but has it been millennia for you? Either way, it’s been a while.”

“Sorry about having you come here.”

Akuto smiled and held out a drink.

“This place is like a never-ending plain…or desert.”

Hiroshi looked around.

“I could make it into any form, but I want to produce as few stories as possible.”

“This really is your world.”

“Yes, I suppose it is. What do you want to drink? I hadn’t decided on that yet.”

Akuto spoke casually and Hiroshi peered into the cup to find what had no form beyond being a liquid.

“Water. Carbonated water.”

As soon as Hiroshi said that, the contents of the cup transformed into cold mineral water with bubbles inside.

“I see.”

He drank the water and it refreshingly wet his throat.

“What does it feel like to be able to do anything?” he asked after taking a breath.

“It feels like arriving at the farthest reaches of biological pleasure,” immediately replied Akuto.

Hiroshi smiled a bit.

“I’ve never felt that.”

“No, you wouldn’t have.” Akuto smiled too. “But we stand on the same stage. We’re probably the only ones who haven’t become a concept.”

“A concept?”

“You can’t understand someone’s personality just by looking at them, but now I can truly experience them. Even if other people’s reactions are mechanical in nature, we have no way of determining it. What resides within me right now may be the countless personalities of all existing people.”

“If a different object with the same name is placed in a box that only the individual can open, can conversation still be achieved?” asked Hiroshi. “If a foreign language dictionary has a sample greeting section and you communicate using that, can you still call it a conversation?”

Akuto looked amused.

“Yes. It definitely isn’t like you to respond like that.”

“While here, I am a synthesis of the concept of Brave,” explained Hiroshi with a grin.

“I see. So a concept is a concept.”

“I do understand what you’re saying, though. The only ones given an incarnation in the Law of Identity’s world are you and me. Wouldn’t incarnation be the best term for being equal concepts before the creator? So in your world, the people inside are equally given an incarnation.”

“I may be the creator here, but I don’t feel like a god. What I can feel is that stories are binding us. Even when I create worlds, I am only free in which story I choose and to what degree I take that story. In the end, I want to destroy that and escape this world.”

Akuto sounded sad.

“You want to destroy the stories? You’ve reconfirmed what your ultimate objective is, haven’t you?”

“It seems so. I thought it would be easy when I first made up my mind. That was back when I decided to kill the gods.”

Akuto sounded exasperated with himself and Hiroshi gave a bitter smile.

“Make sure you’re able to go through with that. If you include the stories created after that, how many normal lives and how many trouble-filled lives have we lived? Also, Keena-chan and Korone-chan are still sleeping. They should last a few millennia, though.”

Despite what he said, his tone made it clear he was not criticizing Akuto.

“That is exactly why I decided to consult you, the one who exists outside my story,” said Akuto in a serious voice.

“I’m fine with complaints like that. After all, we were always a poor match. I was always lighter than you,” said Hiroshi jokingly.

The two of them exchanged embarrassed smiles.

“That’s right. You were always the more reasonable of the two of us. But I can’t imagine that someone who thinks normally would be suited for this.”

Hiroshi confidently shook his head.

“That is no longer the case and that is why I can bring this story to an end.”

Akuto did not seem able to believe that.

“Does that mean you’re determined to kill me?”

However, Hiroshi showed no sign of faltering.

“Of course. Without you, I can rewind time and restart the many types of stories. You can even be there just not as the demon king.”

“But that didn’t work, did it? You’ve already killed me countless times, haven’t you?”

Akuto merely sounded curious.

“Exactly.” Hiroshi pointed at Akuto. “And that’s the problem! In this world – yes, even your world – everyone wants to kill the demon king. And that

includes you. The reason that doesn't work is because the Law of Identity's power is still at work here!"

That comment finally caused Akuto to flinch.

"Come to think of it, the blond Keena stopped my destruction."

"Yes. The Law of Identity must be killed before killing the demon king. That is the only way to resolve this."

A cruel smile appeared on Hiroshi's lips.

Akuto sighed and gave a sulking expression.

"You shouldn't say that when you know it isn't possible."

"I am fused with Bouichirou right now. I have his knowledge and it makes me somewhat bitter. I've been given a worthless life this entire time. That's the life of a side character."

Hiroshi reached for one of the fruits on the table. He was only able to recognize it as a peach after grabbing it.

"I do feel bad about that, but I'm not sure I'd say it was worthless. …No, I suppose I view my own life as worthless now."

Akuto also grabbed a peach, produced a knife, opened a slit, and used a finger to peel it.

"That is why I can't come up with an effective solution," he said. "In the end, there may be nothing I can do. I feel like I called you here to have you destroy everything."

His expression was dark, but Hiroshi laughed aloud.

"Ha ha. How about you stop being so mean-spirited?"

"Mean-spirited?"

Akuto peered into Hiroshi's eyes.

"I'm just saying there's still something you can do. I have an idea."

Hiroshi sliced off a piece of peach flesh and carried it to his mouth with the knife.

"Is there really something I can do?" asked Akuto.

"If you feel bad, it means you can at least feel responsibility," immediately replied Hiroshi. "The people inside you are nothing but pawns, but you don't view them that way."

Akuto gasped.

“That’s right. My responsibility extends beyond you. There are also the ghosts of former personalities. When you get down to it, I’m the ruler of ghosts.”

He bit into the peach as if he suddenly remembered he held it.

“Mankind was wiped out and you could say the people were turned to data.”

“But people’s actions were preserved as data in the past as well.”

“The only ones you turned to data were the ones with existing souls. You can thank Bouichirou for that tidbit of information.”

“Existing souls? You mean the existence that makes you yourself? That’s the concept that appeared within Zero and can be synonymous with the Law of Identity.”

“Yes. It’s nothing but a concept, but it must be viewed as if it exists. You must assume that anything under the Law of Identity’s influence possesses a soul.”

“I see. If you view it as if it exists, it creates a difference between ghosts and data. The black magicians did say that necromancy was incomplete.”

“What I’m saying is that you can summon ghosts.”

“Ghosts, hm? If I do that, I may be able to learn what my mistakes were and understand this world.”

Akuto threw the half-eaten peach and a long table appeared there. Four chairs were now lined up.

Finally, a figure appeared beyond the horizon. The figure flickered like a flame and its features grew more and more distinct as it approached. It was a girl.

Either due to not expecting it or the influence of Bouichirou’s memories, Hiroshi let out a cry of surprise.

“Teruya Eiko!”

That tall body with a nice figure and long hair tied back was indeed the girl who had once dealt in conspiracy and brought a deal to Akuto.

“My memories are pretty horrible,” she complained as if it had all happened yesterday.

When she leaned forward as if to push Hiroshi out of the way, Akuto used his chin to point in the other direction.

“I know,” he said calmly. “You were living in prison, weren’t you? But if you’re used to thinking, nothing is easier than solitary confinement. More

importantly, sit down. I have prepared a table and chairs so we can have a long chat."

"Hah! What a terrible guy! Let's do that. I'm hoping my grudge is enough to banish your heart to some distant place."

She circled around the table, placed a seat in the middle, and sat in it while folding her legs as if to show them off. Her panties were visible below her short skirt, but she seemed to be showing them off as well.

"I never could like you," said Akuto.

She snorted.

"In relationships between men and women, there are some things that can't be changed by liking or not liking someone. Even after living for thousands of years, you're still a little boy, aren't you, Sai Akuto?"

"I'm less than twenty, you know," cut in Hiroshi.

She gave him a cynical look.

"Age isn't everything. You did look like an adult before, though."

"When I was fixated on the Law of Identity, you carried out a betrayal."

"Did you bring me here to criticize me?" She smiled. "At any rate, I did what was right."

"What was right?" Akuto's eyebrows rose. "How was that right? All you did was obey the computer gods and attempt to raise your social status in the real world."

"I don't feel bad about doing that." Eiko looked angry. "Even if the world was going to be destroyed, it was going to happen after my generation. I was going to enjoy my life and leave a decent society to the next generation. If the destruction is so far away, what else could I do? If you and I had been reformed, Bouichirou and I would have been able to travel to the future."

"You were trying to control society. You even tried to change the gods' data to trick the people."

"And what's wrong with that? You're too arrogant. Right now, you're treating the people as a single whole. The people, the masses, the populace, the citizenry, or whatever you want to call them. At the very least, they've faded into the background. With this afterlife, you should have realized that you too are controlling all the fools. You thought about giving them a religion to control them."

Akuto fell silent.

“You’re the same. I may not have known the truth of some distant future, but you did the same thing when you were given an eternity of time.”

“You’re right.” Akuto squeezed out the words. “It is the same thing.”

“Just like you, I had no religious belief. Just like you, I looked down on those who did not think for themselves. The reason you didn’t join me was because you ultimately believed the end of the world was coming and that someone had created the world. You actually did have faith. Faith in something irrational.”

Eiko rebuked Akuto.

All of her words were convincing to him and he could only sink further down in his chair. Just like Bouichirou, he had believed in the Law of Identity.

“I haven’t felt this good since before I died,” said Eiko with a victorious smile.

“Normally, the dead do not have a chance to explain themselves,” cut in Hiroshi. “The imprisoned truly are not on the side of justice.”

His tone of voice changed as he left Akuto’s small table and circled around to the long table.

“It may go without saying seeing as you are the demon king, but you do not need that kind of forgiveness. Not that you want to refer to yourself as the demon king.”

Hiroshi’s expression had become Bouichirou’s at some point.

“It is my turn now. My prediction has been proven true, but that is simply because I based it on accurate data and experience. It is only natural that it came true. You ignored my warning. The extra-universal gods are now invading and throwing everything into chaos.”

“And I must accept that as a mistake on my part,” agreed Akuto.

“I was unable to exchange vows with the Law of Identity, but you could have done it. If you had, the world would have been saved. It could have continued eternally in some other universe without changing form.”

Bouichirou's words were passionate.

"You say that, but you were obsessed with Keena…no, with Sudou Rimu," pointed out Akuto. "You weren't talking about the world."

"If my ego and the benefit lined up, why does it matter?" immediately rebutted Bouichirou. "You had the right to destroy the world. Your mistake was choosing to resolve it all by killing the gods."

"You're right. I gave up on thinking about it back then. I simply acted on impulse and resolved it in what Keena calls 'the boy way'. But I was trying to do what Keena told me when I did it."

Akuto began mumbling and Bouichirou smiled bitterly.

"The extra-universal gods are invading even the space where you can act freely, so the actual universe is likely the same. If you obtain true satisfaction and accept death, this space will come to an end. That will cause it all to scatter. Even those of us who were reincarnated here as eternal beings with a role to play will disappear."

"There's no way for me to save Keena, is there?"

"Keena and the extra-universal gods are of equal importance once you leave this world. And that includes the Law of Identity."

Akuto thought on Bouichirou's words for a while and then suddenly spoke.

"I'll summon the extra-universal gods."

Even Bouichirou looked surprised at that.

"Can you do that?"

"They should have been made a part of the story, too. I'm not sure how much we can understand each other since we don't share a story, but it should still be possible."

As soon as he said it, a black figure appeared in the chair. Everyone there could tell it were there.

They looked toward it and found nothing but shadows. Not even its species could be determined. However, when one looked away, someone was definitely there. It could only be seen out of the corner of the eye, so its sex and expression could not be seen. But when one looked back, there was nothing but shadow.

"I am the Empty Universe," said one black figure.

Just like their visual form, the voice could only be heard when not trying to hear it.

“The Empty Universe?”

Akuto’s question seemed to get through and a faint sound that was not made of words carried a distinct answer.

“It is a universe with no stories, no matter, and only a single voice. There is nothing but an occasional voice meaning ‘you’, ‘du’, ‘vous’, or ‘sue’.”

The meaning of the black figure’s words reached Akuto. After putting the unique subject matter to memory, he asked a further question to hear more.

“So that voice saying ‘you’ is all that exists?”

“That cry of ‘you’ creates self-identity. That created a story upon entering this world. The second person. I am but a voice. ‘You!’ ‘You!’ ‘You!’ ”

“But if there is a story, it can’t be empty.”

“The one calling out can never be met. Not by anyone. The voice merely continues to call out without change.”

Akuto’s image of the Empty Universe expanded in his mind.

It was darkness without darkness.

It was emptiness without light.

It only contained an echoing voice. It was nothing a monosyllabic cry that repeated over and over.

The voice reached nothing. There was nothing but a being that thought someone else must exist.

It was not even clear if such a being was alone or if there were multiple such beings.

Either way, it could only eternally seek out another.

“That’s hell,” muttered Akuto.

“It is not even hell,” denied the black figure. “There is not even suffering. There is nothing.”

“The Empty Universe contains only beings,” said a different voice.

Akuto looked over and found no one. When he looked away, a red-clothed figure appeared there. It had the same odd traits as the black-clothed one.

“I am the Formless Universe.”

This voice was different from the black-clothed one’s, but the voice would still vanish if one tried to hear it as words.

“Is that the universe of the Formless Power?” he asked.

The red-clothed figure gave no response and merely continued speaking.

“In the Formless Universe, beings blend together. The archetypal creatures have the boundaries needed to exist, but when creatures come into contact, those boundaries are destroyed. They devour each other. In this case, the beings indicate each other and let out a shout of ‘you!’ ”

His image of the Formless Universe expanded in his mind.

Many beings were there.

Beings resembling an amoeba, water in zero gravity, or a cloud wriggled through the emptiness in pursuit of each other.

They produced the same sound as the being in the Empty Universe.

<You!>

As they searched for each other, they would sometimes coincidentally come into contact.

And then…

<You!>

It was the same sound, but it became a cry of joy.

“The word ‘you’ means something different from in the emptiness, doesn’t it?” muttered Akuto. “Now it means ‘found you!’ ”

“They devour each other,” affirmed the being in red. “They only notice the other in that instant. ‘You! I finally found you!’ ”

The image in his mind changed.

Two beings bumped into each other and became a single being.

A new voice came from within the being.

“But a moment later, neither knows which they are. And despite becoming a single being, they are filled with a voice. ‘Who!’ ‘Who!’ ‘Who!’ In the Formless Universe, the cry of ‘you!’ lasts only an instant. Afterwards, there is only a being that is exposed to an unpleasant and never-ending voice.”

“As soon as they find someone else, that other person disappears, but that other person forces them to learn what they themselves are,” said Akuto as he gathered his thoughts. Once he did, his voice then grew sharper. “The unpleasant feeling of learning of oneself and gaining self-identity… The Law of Identity!”

That realization was immediately followed by another new voice.

“The Law of Identity can exist in the Formless Universe.”

This one was wearing blue.

“I am the Gravity Universe. There, the beings have become one with their boundaries and possess matter.”

The image in Akuto’s head changed to be the Gravity Universe.

There was light and darkness there.

The beings there still resembled amoebae, but they had a distinct boundary around them. That boundary could be likened to a cell wall and it glittered as it reflected the light.

<You!>

The voice rang out once more.

It was the same sound again, but it was now a shout of anger.

This time, the beings were clearly moving towards each other. They advanced through the universe choosing paths that would cause collisions.

“The boundary forces down the cry of ‘who!’ and they search out others to advance their own being.”

The words of the being in blue caused the image to move further.

The beings collided and the one with the weaker boundary would burst. That being would mostly dissolve into the universe, but one part would be taken in as part of the more powerful one’s boundary.

“They prey on each other?”

Akuto’s voice trembled and a voice he had yet to hear came from the being.

“When their barrier is lost, the being itself disappears, so in the instant that barrier is struck, they cry out. ‘Death!’ ‘Death!’ ‘Death!’ ”

Akuto was left speechless and the voice of another universe spoke.

“Pleasure can exist in the Gravity Universe.”

This one wore white.

The image in Akuto’s head grew bright and the twinkling of stars was present.

It was primitive, but life forms were there.

The single cell organisms began to divide.

“I am the Anti-Gravity Universe. There, the beings multiply. The barriers grow and divide. It is filled with voices. ‘Me!’ ‘Me!’ ‘Me!’ ”

<Me!>

Those were the voices of delight at being born.

“Love can exist in the Anti-Gravity Universe.”

The beings there also preyed on each other, but when they collided, they each split off a part of themselves which combined to produce a new being.

<Me!>

<You!>

<Death!>

<Multiply!>

The universe was filled with lively voices.

“This is only a step away from the universe I know,” said Akuto. “Is this all the other universes?”

The variously colored extra-universal gods gave a denial.

“These are the archetypes that created the different universes.”

The extra-universal gods urged him to look behind him.

He looked toward the horizon without looking directly at it.

The entire horizon was filled with shadows. They were humanoid and countless in number.

They were not as simple as the ones he had seen so far. They wore many different kinds of clothes and they had clear sexes. Their shadows flickered only in the corner of his vision and each and every one undoubtedly contained hundreds of millions of beings. They all contained ghosts just like he did.

“Are they the same as me?” he asked.

The differently-colored extra-universal gods vanished without answering.

The other people representing universes that he had only caught a glimpse of finally faded into nothingness.

Only Akuto and Bouichirou remained at the table.

“They are likely the same as us.”

For a while, the two of them were too shocked to speak, but Bouichirou finally agreed with Akuto.

“You and they are both universes. Perhaps we should refer to you as god universes. Before you released all of the world’s possibilities, it may have been only you that was the same as them.”

Bouichirou pointed at him and he let out a long breath and nodded.

“The birth of the universe resembled the birth of stories. If the universe really is multiple stories, then there must be countless beings like me outside of it.”

“If so, there should be a spectrum,” said Bouichirou confidently.

“A spectrum? What’s that?” asked Akuto.

“It means they are divided into multiple levels. You could call it their story density. Think of them as having become stories to varying degrees.”

“And we’ve done so to a much higher degree?”

“We know that the world is fictional. Doesn’t that seem like a very high degree?’

Bouichirou’s comment brought something to Akuto’s mind.

The story of interference from outside the universe was centered on not perceiving the world as fictional. That was a story based on the assumption that one lived as only a single incarnation.

“I feel like I only came to understand myself once I saw the outside,” agreed Akuto.

“But when you get down to it, even the extra-universal gods are fictional. They merely cannot distinguish between god, mankind, and ghost. Only once you inform the higher being and create an enclosure within a single universe can you make a clear distinction between the three. That allows you to understand who it is you are inside.”

Akuto thought about Bouichirou’s analysis.

“Okay. That means I need to think about how to respond to that higher being,” said Akuto. “I don’t just want to save the beings inside me. I want to save all the beings inside the Law of Identity’s universe. I want to free them from the stories. That is my wish.”

It was now Bouichirou’s turn to think.

“The stories can only be viewed as a virus. Originally, life should have been complete once it was created in the Anti-Gravity Universe. No matter how

complex the cells grew or how complex the reflection became, the life forms would only hunt, kill, and reproduce. That is all. There would be no sin or forgiveness there."

"But the extra-universal gods brought the story of unreasonable death into me. Its story density should be fairly low."

"In that case, unreasonable death is a natural thing. No reason is needed to kill. That would explain it."

"Nevertheless, we avoid meaningless killing."

"Avoidance of killing is due to the stories, yet you claimed the stories were the cause of mass murder."

Bouichirou's words caused Akuto to think once more and he summoned someone else.

He waved his hand toward the horizon and a muscular man with dark skin walked from that distant horizon.

It was Marine. He had once ruled the Republic, wielded the Formless Power, and fought Akuto. He had not wished for it, but he had caused the destruction of the world.

"I feel like I was called here to represent an ideology and it annoys me a little."

Just like the other summoned ghosts, Marine started by complaining.

"It seems like ghosts are always complaining to me," said Akuto with a shrug.

"Of course they are. You killed us. But you at least had the courage to face me without fearing criticism. I'll grant you that."

Marine gave a hearty laugh and did not hesitate to sit in one of the chairs.

"Since you're my ghost, that might count as self-praise," complained Akuto.

"Don't worry about it," said Marine. "Both humans and ghosts cannot distinguish themselves from others."

"Yes. That is exactly why I think we hesitate to kill. If we truly viewed ourselves as distinct, humans would have no laws outside of the biological ones."

"That is a positive side to the stories. Others exist inside us as ghosts and our love for that fact leads us to avoid preying on and killing them. Reproduction and dividing must hold the advantage."

Marine looked at Akuto as if to ask him if he finally understood.

“But I view you as a manifestation of the negative side.” Akuto looked back at Marine. “That is why you are here.”

“This could easily revert to a rudimentary argument. The state of ghosts creates others. The ghosts of the Republic’s people are persecuted by the ghosts of the imperial people. Pointing that out as an illusion is to cast aside the positive side.”

Marine’s reply was decisive and Akuto grimaced as if it had hit him where it hurt.

“I see. So I was the type to throw out the positive side along with the negative side.”

“You are a loveless man,” said Marine with a smile.

“So that is my sin.”

Akuto’s expression as always serious, but it grew completely stiff now.

Marine then showed a perfectly natural smile.

“Friend, you have found the answer to why I must criticize you. Isn’t that enough?”

“But what does that mean?” Akuto exposed his emotions as he spoke. “I’ve more or less found something within me that I can’t break through. I can’t free everyone. I hold a contradiction and I know I can’t resolve it.”

“In that case,” began Bouichirou. “Start by eliminating everyone but us.”

Akuto hesitated to do so.

“What are you going to do?”

“Just do it.”

There was great resolve in Bouichirou’s words, so Akuto did as he was asked and eliminated Marine and the long table.

Silence fell and as Akuto and Hiroshi sat facing each other.

“Is this good?”

“Yes.” Hiroshi nodded and seemed to have difficulty saying what came next. “I had actually made up my mind from the beginning.”

“Made up your mind?”

“I knew from the beginning that this might be something you couldn’t resolve on your own.”

“I want to say I’m surprised, but I’m really not. I was called the demon king and that’s exactly what I am. I’m a weapon and all I have is logic. I don’t have love.”

“I wish you’d realized that while still alive.”

Hiroshi smiled and Akuto did the same.

“So do I.”

“Now, let’s get down to business.” Hiroshi leaned forward. “Please create a world where I’m the protagonist.”

“Eh?”

Akuto was confused.

“Create a world where I’m the protagonist and keep the story density as low as you can.”

“It sounds like there’s more to this than just a desire to be the protagonist.”

“There is. Make it a world where I live as a normal person.”

Hiroshi was serious and that alone kept Akuto from understanding what the boy was thinking.

“What will that accomplish?”

“In that world with a low story density, I will redo my life with my memories of the past intact and there I will write a story to eliminate the story.”

Akuto’s eyes opened wide.

“That is…surprising to hear.”

“Stories have a positive side too, so it may be impossible to eliminate stories altogether. However, I can at least bring your story to an end.”

“So you will write my story there…and bring it to an end?”

“Yes.”

Akuto had never considered the idea, so he was bewildered.

“Can I really ask that of you?”

He could not predict what would happen, but he knew it would lead to a final ending if it succeeded.

“You can. This is something only I can do and, if you recall, killing you was my objective. And I have a feeling doing so will save this entire world.”

Hiroshi’s words were calm and he faced straight forward.

After a while, Akuto nodded.

“Understood. I will now reconstruct this world of the afterlife. Will allowing a high influence from the extra-universal gods and returning to before the mana civilization work?”

“Yes. Around 1990 should be good.”

“Let’s try this. I’m leaving it up to you.”

Akuto once more balled the world up in his hand and spread it out again.

Chapter 5: Incarnation

I said our minds are infected by the virus that we call stories and someone injected that virus into us.

I also said we must not cast aside those stories.

I have seen the original human race and the origin of “stories”.

As a result, I am here now.

I am the writer of this story.

But before I could realize this duty of mine, I needed to experience the death of my former lover as described in the prologue. I started living in this world of low story density and I essentially lost my memories. I may have needed an experience that overloaded me on the story aspect of life.

Now that my memories have returned, I have taken a fairly long time to write the story of Sai Akuto’s life that will end the story. This here will likely be the final part of that collection of writings.

However, it was not an easy path. Once the story approached its end in 2010, it required great resolve to begin writing the rest. Nothing would come to mind and I would simply sit still with a dull headache. As if an invisible ring were binding my shoulders, I was overcome by a strange uncomfortable feeling and a weight that restricted my movements. Even standing up grew difficult.

That discomfort grew the more I resolved myself to write these records.

I knew what writers had long called that feeling: a slump or writer’s block. Someone more pretentious may have named it a spreading mold or a black attack dog, but I stupidly called it the “crazy ghost”.

The crazy ghost stays in the corner of my room and weighs down on my shoulders if I focus on it. If I sleep or focus on something mindless, it eventually disappears, but it would otherwise press down uncomfortably on my shoulders and force me to do some light exercise. To make matters worse, the exercise had to put a great burden on me to be effective and it felt a bit like a gamble. Sometimes it would help me feel better, but sometimes it would produce enough pain in my shoulders to provide an intense urge to vomit.

The pain was enough to completely eat into my everyday life.

Once I began to realize I could not defeat it or tame it, I finally realized what it was.

It was lightness.

In other words, the lighter the material I was going to write, the more interference I would meet when I started to write it.

I must write about this lightness in more detail. It usually refers to something superficial that does not require deep thought, but in this case, it refers to being highly imaginary.

First, the characters that have left their physical bodies become the protagonists. That means they are not harmed by physical impacts that would kill a normal person and they occasionally use supernatural powers. That gives the characters deviant personalities that would be unthinkable with normal humans.

When writing a story toward a happy ending, there might be unhappiness, but it all has meaning. One method of avoiding an unhappy story is to not allow the characters to age and to keep their minds unchanged.

Whenever I tried to write a “light” story such as that, I would be overcome by a slump.

Then what about a “heavy” story? I tried writing those as a change of pace, but as the imaginative portion grew larger (even if the characters are realistic, the story is still fiction), the crazy ghost would always be waiting for me as I continued writing.

That was clearly interference from the story.

I felt as if I had seen the true nature of the story.

This story had been written to cast aside stories and this was obvious resistance. When I thought back, I could recall various difficulties in coming this far, but those had all come about due to the story itself controlling my memories and actions.

This is even true regarding book sales. People find light stories embarrassing, but it is the extremely light stories that they truly enjoy. A great number of people secretly buy light stories that fulfill their desires. On the other hand, heavy stories are said to capture the essence of humanity and those who write them are praised and said to be intelligent. Also, even the most absurd story will be believed as the truth if it becomes the scriptures of some religion.

Stories are a lot like gravity, aren’t they? Doesn’t their weight bind us and lead us to avoid “lightness”?

And if human nature desires that “lightness”…

I thought I heard a sound from within my brain. I clearly understood how to carry out my duty. The demon king had made this world and I had to guide the demon king and those depressed thoughts toward “lightness”.

I quickly realized how to do that.

It had to be possible for the Law of Identity to access this world. The blonde Keena’s attempts to stop the demon king made that clear. The Law of Identity desired a proper ending to the story, so I would show her that the story had been eliminated.

Given the structure of the world, she would have been hiding without the demon king’s knowledge. The demon king was a universal being who had constructed this world, but the self-identity needed to form a story had to have been created. In other words, the Law of Identity had to exist as a character. Nevertheless, the demon king had not noticed her in this world. He likely assumed she would not be present because Keena was asleep.

My objective could be described as having the Law of Identity and the demon king meet and I would do so via the story that rejects stories. That search would become the final story.

“I don’t know what you’re trying to say.”

I had somehow managed to explain all of the above to a harsh Hattori Junko after calling her to a train station café in Kamata.

Or I tried to explain it.

She could be fairly intelligent, but she was stubborn and had difficulty accepting more far-fetched ideas.

I suppose I should explain who Junko is in this world. When returning the story to around the year 2000, the demon king gave us different personalities and lives. The world was created in 1990 and we were given false memories of the past. That past made Junko a former coworker of mine. As much story density had been removed from her as possible, so she was more or less a slim and plain woman.

“I’m saying this world was created quite recently. About a decade has passed since then, though. …Anyway, I want you to bring back your memories from before that when you were a character.”

I told her even more. Even if she could not rationally understand it, I figured she would more or less understand if she appealed to the instincts from her memories.

“There were some old manga like that. Were they called reincarnation stories?”

She sounded amused. Before my memories returned, I had consulted her about working as a novelist and writer, so this was not our first bizarre conversation. Normally, she might have thought I was crazy, but she was used to imaginary conversations.

However, she still had a strong distinction between fiction and reality, so it was difficult for her to tell she was enveloped by the idea of a “light” story. After all, accepting that would mean she was crazy too.

“Well, you can think of it as a game about a supposed past life. Anyway, I’m seriously searching for something like that. You can treat it as a game, but is there some common individual in both of our memories of the past?”

“We can’t exactly go over all of our memories.”

She stirred her iced coffee in annoyance.

“It can just be someone that led you to become a writer.”

“In that case…”

She pulled out a notebook and began flipping through the many pages held under the cover. She found a plastic sheet with receipts, cards, and other things stuck in it and she pulled a folded piece of copy paper from it.

It contained a list of names and addresses printed in extremely small text.

“This is the list of people I played tabletop with. This girl here is the one you’re interested in.”

The name she pointed at was very strange.

“These aren’t real names. They’re really chuuni.”

“We were young. They’re pennames, but that’s all we ever called each other. This girl got me really hooked on the games and that’s what led me to become a writer.”

She gave a nostalgic smile and I copied down the address.

“What’s her real name?”

“Hm… What was it? I’ve forgotten. Ahh, but it’s on the tip of my tongue.”

“It doesn’t matter. So you say you knew her from those games?”

She carefully folded the old and worn copy paper.

Tabletop referred to tabletop RPGs. One would act out the role of a character in the game and tell a story like that. Essentially, it was a way of

enjoying a story that was spontaneously created from nothing but conversation.

“I’d like to do it again, but I don’t have time. Are you going to search that girl out? If you find her, tell her about me.”

Junko smiled as she spoke.

I could tell she had once enjoyed creating a story and that had led her to become a writer.

I immediately visited the address, but I found nothing like a residence there. I instead found a new building. The apartment building given in the address seemed to have been demolished. Junko had said she had played the game during college, so this girl with the chuuni penname had likely lived in a cheap apartment for college students.

Finding the location of a former resident of the apartment building seemed like it would take a lot of work and it would be faster to check with the other people I know who had been reincarnated(?) before me.

My next appointment was with Yoshie.

“You want to know what led me to get this job? You’re as crazy as ever.”

She was several times harsher than Junko. She often went beyond joking and reached the level of abuse. She was short and weak, but her movements and voice were always exaggerated. Unfortunately, she was not a genius here and the only point in common were the glasses and how she did everything her own way.

She worked at an editorial production in Shibuya and we had been coworkers long ago. I had managed to meet her at the production office on the pretext of it being about work.

She lacked the ability to listen to what people said, so I did not even try to tell her about her former memories or anything like that. She would tell me to “get real” and the conversation would end there. However, she was always willing to talk about male idol groups. To her, reality was what actually existed. To be honest, I found it hard to figure out why she had taken a job dealing with stories.

“I’m investigating the connections between different writers’ relationships,” I said to give a reason. “During a certain period, they tend to be influenced by the same thing.”

“I did it because a friend told me it was an easy and profitable job,” answered Yoshie.

She had no experience with writing and she had no interest in novels or movies. Even so, it seemed a friend who was already a writer had introduced her to it.

“There was nothing I wanted to do. Once you’re actually doing it, all office work is a pain. Go tell the company I deserve a raise.”

“I don’t work for the company.”

“Then at least tell them how great I am. Also, treat me to lunch.”

Conversations with her always strayed off track like that. She was utilitarian and never gave anything much thought. At any rate, I had to finish what I came to do, so I asked about the person who had introduced her to being a writer.

“She was from Yokohama. She should still be working as a writer for an editorial production there.”

She told me the Yokohama company name and I jotted it down.

“Why is a writer like you asking something so meaningless?” she asked.

She of course had no talent for writing. Due to being introduced, she had been given office work to do and had not been fired. Because (she believed) she was in charge of the writers, she would often find fault in whatever writers did.

“You wouldn’t understand,” I told her.

I could not expect the intelligence Yoshie had once had. She was currently only interested in profiting and it all came down to money. She seemed to snag men from somewhere, but most of her desires were focused on money. Then again, that was one form of happiness.

“Still, you must’ve been saved by a writer’s story at some point in this job. Have you?” I asked.

“I watch the Friday drama,” she immediately replied. “I really want to know what happens next. She may be a side character, but that girl is so cool.”

Once she began talking about that, I was forced to bring the conversation to an end.

Here, Yoshie was extremely indifferent when it came to stories. No, perhaps “unaware” would be the better word. She would react to “light” stories, but she had not noticed the “story” of money’s value that was controlling her and that was exactly why she had not gained monetary success. To accumulate money, one needed to control that desire or to have greed large enough to be noticeable.

Still, she was not as unhappy as she let on. She would likely get married at some point and then live a relatively happy life. Or she would if this world were eternal.

In the end, she too had been saved by the stories. The “light” stories gave her daily amusement and the “heavy” stories only affected her enough to subconsciously follow them.

It came to me then that she had been “tamed” by the stories.

But when I brought it to words, I was also overcome by a sense of self-doubt. What if this world was truly reality and my thoughts were nothing but delusions? The idea that stories were a virus and that realizing that protected the special side of this world would be nothing more than an arrogant madness.

I could only trust that this investigation would make it clear whether I was mistaken or not. I decided to contact the editorial production Yoshie had introduced me to. I only needed to see if Yoshie’s friend was there, so a single phone call would suffice once I had the number.

The answer came quite easily.

“That employee did work here, but she quit last year.”

The president answered me directly and I asked for her name.

“Um…○○…no, Soga.”

The first name he gave seemed to be a penname. To my surprise, it was the same as the name I had heard from Junko. I was even more surprised that the real name was Soga.

I desperately suppressed the voice that threatened to leap from my throat, politely asked him to contact me if he had a job for me, and hung up.

It was sounding more realistic that a single individual had interfered with our lives here and that she was the Law of Identity. I had asked the president for her address, so I only had to head there.

The address was an apartment between Yokohama Station and the old Takashimacho Station.

The area contained tiled and unused land that had been left undeveloped and was not residential or business land. Trees had been planted to hide the empty land below the overpasses. I had only travelled a few minutes from lively Yokohama, but this strange space seemed completely empty.

The apartment building was relatively new and luxurious, but it smelled oddly like a rundown area. I sensed the unique dimness of an unsafe area of town and the lack of people seemed eerie.

I checked the nameplate on the proper address and it contained a name other than Soga.

I knew it might lead to nothing, but I decided it was worth checking. Even if someone else lived there, they might know the forwarding address for the mail if the move was recent.

I rang the bell and spoke into the intercom that I was looking for a "Soga-san". The door opened and an old acquaintance walked out.

"You're finally here!"

It was Fujiko. Of course, she had a different name in this world.

She was a beauty with long black hair, but that was the only fictional aspect of her. She was already married and she was not my type, but I was still nervous about facing her. She stood out enough to gather curious gazes when the two of us were together, but she was otherwise completely ordinary and she had a sociable personality. She wrote horoscopes that did not sell and she was married to a government worker. We occasionally contacted each other due to our work.

"You live here?" I responded in frantic confusion.

"This is about Soga-san, right? Come in."

She slipped on her sandals and opened the door wide.

Inside, I saw a wooden table, a cupboard, white wallpaper, and nothing that stood out. However, she did not seem to be living with her husband. From the amount of tableware and slippers, she seemed to be living alone.

"There's a lot I want to ask you about," I said.

She gave a broad smile and pointed at me.

"Your memories came back, didn't they? Amazing, isn't it!?"

"You mean the memories of Constant Magic Academy?" I hesitantly asked.

"Yes! It really surprised me! It's like a fantasy."

She was so excited that she forgot to offer me a seat. I could not believe I had hit the jackpot like this. It was enough for me to feel dizzy.

"I think this is a more serious issue than that," I said reservedly.

Her excitement lessened somewhat, but she seemed to want to talk about a lot of different things because no one else in this world remembered. I

wanted to give clarity to my own memories and confirm that I was not mistake, so we discussed those memories for quite a while.

Our memories did indeed match up. Oddly enough, we both retained our personalities from this world and the events of those memories felt like a dream. Our personalities here were not all that different from the ones in the memories. I had not lost the side of me that was an author and Fujiko was still a sociable fortune-teller even if she was no longer domineering or intent on world domination.

“It’s strange to think that was me,” said Fujiko.

“But there’s no other way for our memories to match up like this.”

“I never read your novels, but maybe now I will.”

“You never read them?”

My shoulders drooped.

“If I had, I definitely would have doubted these memories.”

“I suppose you’re right. At first, I was partially doing it subconsciously.”

“Now, about Soga-san,” she said.

“Right. She lived here, didn’t she?”

“Yes.”

She lowered her voice and nodded.

“What’s with that look?”

“Oh, she said it was a secret.”

“A secret?”

“Well… My memories came back a bit before yours did. I was doing a past life horoscope and it came to me.”

“How does that lead to Soga-san?”

“I started by doubting my memories from before 1990.”

“Yeah, those were implanted into us, weren’t they?”

“I searched out my first memory upon coming here and it was related to Soga-san.”

“I see. So the method I chose wasn’t wrong. Both Junko and Yoshie were led toward their jobs by Soga-san.”

“But she said you alone are special.”

“Me?”

“Yes. She said she had only sent you a letter.”

“A letter?”

“Yes. She said she could not directly meet with you no matter what.”

“Why not?”

“Hmm. She did explain it to me, but I didn’t really understand it. I think it had to do with Akuto viewing the world through you and so you couldn’t meet the Law of Identity.”

Fujiko sounded apologetic as she did her best to explain and I grew uneasy.

“But I can still contact her, right?”

“It seems you can speak with her through the internet.”

Fujiko pulled out a pad of paper placed in front of the cupboard. It had some English characters that seemed to be an internet phone address.

“This seems so cold.”

It seemed too light for what I had been seeking. Then again, “lightness” was exactly what I sought, so it may have been appropriate for the end of the search.

“You don’t have to rush, do you?” asked Fujiko.

She seemed to want to speak further.

“No,” I replied.

She enjoyed speaking of those memories, even if those days had been very “heavy” for me.

I did not return home until late at night, but I booted up my PC and started the internet phone software. If I could speak with her, I wanted to do it as soon as possible.

I made the call and it was immediately answered.

“I have been waiting,” said a calm voice.

There was no video.

“Soga-san?”

“That name is not wrong.”

According to my memories, this manner of speech did not belong to Soga Keena. It belonged to the Law of Identity.

“The letter I received was not from a ‘Soga’.”

I recalled the letter that Fujiko had mentioned.

That letter had led to me becoming an author and it had come from a childhood friend. Of course, I now knew that was based on false memories. At the time, I had been oddly moved. Even if it was a false memory, I did not want to believe it was.

“I apologize for deceiving you, but that letter came from me.”

“If you say that, it actually feels like you saved me. Or perhaps not. Are there records of you living in this world?”

“Yes. As you have learned, I got to know the others, married someone you do not know, and have a family.”

It felt like I was being mocked.

I of course had no memory of meeting my childhood friend since then, but I had of course appreciated the girl who had valued my talent during middle school and secretly sent me a letter.

“This is a terrible end to the search. Can’t you even let me see your face?”

“Before you, I too am nothing but a story,” said the Law of Identity.

That was certainly true. I was merely speaking over the internet. If I was to doubt that, I could doubt anything about my situation. Fujiko and Junko were acquaintances, so she would likely have known I had said some odd things to Junko. And if she had read my novels, she could pretend to have the same memories as me. Faking the Law of Identity would not be hard.

“So even if you’re a fake, your value remains the same?”

“Even if it is all a lie, convincing him is what matters.”

“You mean the demon king? But I thought my goal was to convince you, the Law of Identity. Won’t you save everyone?”

“No. Well, I suppose you could say it is both. You have recorded the story of the demon king. That means you have properly acknowledged this world and that convincing you is the same as convincing him. Of course, you must also convince me.”

The Law of Identity’s voice was flat as if being mechanically altered.

“You mean we must convince each other that the story has ended?”

“Yes. So show me the records you have made.”

As she insisted, I transmitted the final file – that is, the final volume of my novels – over the internet phone.

She confirmed she had received it and then I waited.

I could say nothing until she did.

As a record, meaning could not be found in it.

It would simply have a forced influence on the story.

At the moment, the “heaviness” was stronger.

“Do you think the virus has infected the mind or the body?”

That was what the Law of Identity said first.

I felt obligated to answer even if I did not understand.

“Isn’t it both? I think the body is infected first, but it is the mind that is controlled.”

After a short silence, she asked another question.

“The truth he needs to learn is that the story has ended and that learning that truth will save the people. Correct?”

It was a strange question. I was not sure what she was attempting to confirm.

“I can’t say for sure, but that is what I thought. He attempted to save the world. No, since the afterlife and the Law of Identity exist, I think he must have believed it could be saved in some way.”

“As you are aware of that much, I will now give you these final words.”

“Okay.”

I waited, but I received only silence as if she were hesitating.

“What is it?”

“Nothing, I will give you those words now,” she said. “You are incarnated and imprisoned here. That is the role of the hero. The world will be saved. Those living there and those who can entrust themselves to the lightness of the story will eventually come to me.”

She said nothing more.

“Wait! Wait!”

I called out but received no reply.

In fact, the account I was connected to disappeared.

I may have been tricked. I may have truly gone insane.

Only hopeless words echoed through my mind.

It seemed something had ended.

No, something *had* ended.

That much I could tell.

There was no mistaking it.

But I did not know what it was that had ended.

I had a feeling that I would most certainly face tomorrow. The sun would rise in the morning and I had a manuscript nearing its deadline.

But his story had ended.

The salvation of the people that Sai Akuto had wanted had ended.

I stayed awake until dawn and then went outside.

The usual city scenery surrounded me.

I entered coffee shop and ordered a hot dog and coffee. The clerk definitely existed.

As noon approached, I contacted Fujiko.

She did not remember what had happened the day before, but she spoke with great delight. She sounded as happy as when we had discussed the other world.

Junko invited me to join a tabletop RPG game. She claimed to have suddenly had an urge to play because she had not done so in a while.

I decided not to contact Yoshie.

The three of them were no longer Fujiko, Junko, and Yoshie. It would be best to call them by their names in this world and to treat them as such.

I started walking to my workplace and thought I heard a metallic noise from underfoot.

There were fetters there. Or rather, I was overcome by the sensation of heavy chains around my feet.

Those chains were the “heavy” stories.

Those stories did nothing but bind us, but we still felt grateful for them and would occasionally use “light” stories to temporarily forget about them.

But those without physical bodies had certainly “lightly” escaped. And in doing so, they had left a hint telling us how to escape the stories.

Those of us with bodies remained here where we simply wandered through this world.

Chapter 6: Evolution

Korone leisurely awoke to someone calling her name.

“Please wait as I activate my memories. …Sorry, but the viscosity of my oil has increased. Can you bring me an oil can?”

She sat up in her futon, took the oil can, and chugged it like a can of cola.

“It would be too much of a pain to give the exact number, but it has been over a thousand years, Akuto-san.”

She smiled.

“Sorry about that.” He looked embarrassed. “I was in a dimension where time was meaningless.”

“I do not know what you mean, but I assume everything has been resolved in some way.”

She stood up and looked around the area.

The passage of ten thousand years showed itself in the deterioration of the room, but it still functioned well enough.

This was the space station in which Keena had been put to sleep.

“Are you the only one here?” asked Korone in her pajamas.

Akuto alone stood in the space station room.

“Yes, but anyone can join us if I call for them.”

“I’m not sure I understand.” she said curiously.

She must have failed to call in data from the gods because she tilted her head.

“The gods are not responding. I cannot create a transfer circle either. Mankind does not exist. How did you do this?”

“You’ll see soon enough. By the way…” He pointed out the window. “Has the earth been like this the entire time?”

“Yes,” she replied while looking down at the planet. “It is still too soon for the surviving life to flourish.”

Due to the meteor, ocean had remained only on a portion of the earth and everything else was covered in brown clumps of rubble.

“Hiroshi-san did his best, but it was useless.”

“Did he try to stop the meteor at the very end?”

“Yes.”

“I see. He was that kind of guy. He saved me too. He was probably my only true friend. Oh, I said I could call anyone here, but he’s the one exception.”

A shadow fell over Akuto’s face.

“You have been saying quite a few strange things. What happened?”

Akuto nodded in response.

“It would be difficult to explain, but that’s fine. We’ll have plenty of time afterwards and I can probably take you along.”

Korone still looked confused, so he winked at her.

“You seem different from before. At any rate, if you have some goal in mind, shall I wake the empress?”

She turned to the edge of the room where a coffin-shaped cold sleep device sat.

“Please do.”

“Then I shall. But if you can call in anyone, why not call in someone else to look after her?”

“Having someone else here would ruin the emotional reunion,” answered Akuto with a shake of his head.

“I see. Please wait a moment. Wearing pajamas would be rude, so I will change.”

She began stripping off her pajamas.

“Hurry it up.”

He began operating the cold sleep device’s console and the machine activated, but it would take some time before she woke up.

“Oh?” said Korone in admiration. She was now in nothing but her underwear. “So you can remain composed around female nudity now? I had thought something had changed, but it seems that change was the loss of your virginity.”

“C’mon…”

He spoke, but he did not deny it.

“That mature reaction is rather disappointing. You truly have grown.”

She made a show of wiping away tears.

“So who was it that took your virginity?”

“Could you not worry about that?” he complained.

She slipped on her school uniform and he finished inputting commands into the console.

The countdown until thawing began.

“How moving,” said Korone. “This means you intend to restore the earth, doesn’t it? Will you be able to reconstruct the empire?”

“No.” Akuto shook his head. “We’re not going to the earth.”

“Is there another planet we can move to? There are no planets outside the solar system, after all.”

Korone was surprised and Akuto appeared unsure how to explain.

“What is it?” she asked. “Stop hiding things from me and give a proper explanation.”

“That isn’t it. You could say we’ll be evolving.”

“Evolving? What an odd thing to say. For one thing, biological evolution means to-…”

He cut her off as she began explaining.

“I know that, but I can’t think of any other way to say it. Basically, we’ll be shifting to another universe.”

“Shifting?”

“That’s right. In other words…”

He trailed off as the cold sleep device emitted a noise.

He stopped explaining and pressed the switch to open the coffin-like cover.

The heavy-looking cover clicked and cold air flowed out from the gap. It then slid to the side and the coffin began to look more like a bed.

The person sleeping there was an empress rather than a princess, but she was a beautiful girl in white all the same.

Keena slept calmly while surrounded by cold air.

She looked like she had only just drifted off to sleep, but Akuto had been waiting to see that face for a very long time.

“A kiss would be best to wake her.”

Korone may have been joking, but Akuto silently leaned down toward her.

As his face approached hers, he felt her irregular breaths tickling his cheek.

“You’re awake, aren’t you?” he said.

She almost burst out laughing with her eyes still closed, but her lips were covered before she could.

It was a long kiss.

Her arms wrapped around behind his back and the two of them stood up together.

“I missed you.”

“To me, it feels like only yesterday.”

“Then I managed to make it easy for you,” he said in relief.

“But,” she said as if hinting at something. “I feel like I had a very long dream. In other words, I know a bit about what happened…over there!”

She pinched his side through his clothes.

“Ow! What do you mean what happened over-… Oh!”

When he realized the Law of Identity had to know what he had done in the afterlife, he began sweating. She was likely referring to what had occurred between him, Junko, Fujiko, and Yoshie.

“Um…well…about that…”

He grew flustered, but she started laughing.

“But I forgive you.” She held his hand. “We’ll be together forever now, right?”

“Not even I know what our life will be like from now on.”

“Hmm. Where we’re going now is where all stories end. It is the place mankind will continue to strive for from now on.”

She must have heard that from the Law of Identity because she did not seem to know what the words meant.

“The place mankind will continue to strive for from now on, hm?”

That eternal dream would likely remain within mankind thanks to the “light” stories. They would strive to reach that place where the lightness of stories finally reached zero.

“Do we have to perform the ritual to create a void body?” asked Akuto.

“It seems so. I don’t know the details, but it basically means we’ll get married for real.”

Keena sounded excited and began the process without waiting for Akuto.

That ritual brought both the stories and one’s body down to zero and created a void.

Creating that lower body known as a void body was the first step toward becoming a being not of this world.

It was data made of imaginary numbers.

It was space with no time.

It was a place where the laws of physics came to an end.

It was beyond causality.

It was casting aside one's earthly form.

It was the salvation of all.

Keena took Akuto's hand.

For his transformation in the negative direction, all of the noisy souls inside him were transferred into her.

Countless voices filled the space between them.

Countless thoughts were there: Junko's, Yoshie's, Fujiko's, Lily's, women's, and men's.

"What does it feel like to be saved?"

"I've never experienced it, so I wouldn't know. Well, we'll know soon enough."

"It must feel like binding with Akuto-sama on the most fundamental level!"

"You've lived a carefree life, haven't you? Personally, I guess it doesn't really matter."

"President, you need to be more honest with your desires, arinsu."

"Like hunger, gya."

"Guga."

"More importantly, will our desire for prestige be fulfilled there?"

"Is hem-hem all you can think of when you hear the word salvation? You sure are savages!"

"Quiet, you black savage! Also, the student council president is the carefree one!"

"I'd rather you called it being relaxed. More importantly, there's a few more people who haven't shown up, right?"

"Apparently they won't show up if the storyteller has forgotten about them."

"That's about the most basic meta comment I've ever heard. Are you sure we should be doing that?'

"If you search carefully enough, you'll find Rubbers and that fly guy."

"Please spare me."

"Should we call in that ramen lover?"

"No!"

“You should not discriminate against male characters.”

“Headmaster!”

“Then again, I’m just about the only male character that hasn’t become the storyteller.”

“What about the members of that demon king worshiping black metal band? They had names, didn’t they?”

“They’re being saved, too?”

“All of the souls are being saved.”

“Hmph. Well, fine! Everyone, come on out!” shouted Junko.

All of the souls gathered.

They let go of their anger, sorrow, grudges, and envy. They left all those things in the real world.

The entire universe shrank down.

Space folded up around Akuto and completely closed.

“Will you be taking me with you?” asked Korone as she was sucked up into Akuto.

“Zero showed that a L’Isle-Adam gains a sense of self once a personality sets in. You too have a sense of self.”

Akuto smiled and his own physical body rapidly shrank as he was taken into Keena.

Finally, Keena turned inside out and disappeared into the new land that was the anti-universe.

All that remained was emptiness within emptiness. That emptiness did not even contain words. In other words, a new Empty Universe had been created.

But let us move back in time a bit.

In a fraction of an instant, the smallest unit of time that could be written of as time, this conversation took place.

A single being remained in the Empty Universe.

Just the one.

“Am I… Am I being left behind?” asked the hero.

The voice belonged to Hiroshi, to Bouichirou, to Kento, and to the storyteller.

“Yes. As I said before, you will remain,” replied the Law of Identity.

She appeared to be a god of salvation, but she was also a cruel god.

“Why!?” he shouted bitterly.

He had half expected this, but he had hoped there would be salvation for him as well.

But there was not.

“You must remain here to leave the story here. That way the next souls can continue on as well.”

He found that hard to believe and shook his head.

“But that’s too cruel!”

“I am aware it is cruel. That cruelty can be felt through the story. You will simply be starting over from the beginning. In the next instant, you will be in an Empty Universe, followed by a Formless Universe, and then it will shift to a Gravity Universe. That will likely take tens of thousands of years.”

“Please stop! I have to redo the story?”

“Because of who you are, that is unavoidable.”

“Because of who I am? I can’t escape that!”

“That is what it means to be the Law of Identity.”

“I will be the Law of Identity?”

“You are the next Law of Identity. If you are to be saved, it will be when you act as the Law of Identity and successfully guide the new personalities. The story will be trapped by gravity, so you must guide it toward lightness.”

“But that’s so sad. I have to part ways with everyone?”

“Even sadness will be outdated and obsolete under the story that will take effect in the next instant. You will not be parting ways with everyone. There must have been souls other than yours that were not saved by this story of the Demon King in the Very Back, so if you become the next Law of Identity, you will not be alone.”

That conversation occurred in the smallest unit of time, but there was no concept of time for the hero once he was within the Empty Universe that contained his mind.

He thought for eternity.

He thought of nonsense as nonsense.

Who could prove that he was sane?

This was the same as that.

He could do nothing but speak.

“Is someone there?”

He would search.

“I found you!”

He would shout.

He was forced to create stories.

In order to reach the best possible salvation, he had to head toward the worst possible conclusion.

Even so, if he repeated it all, he would arrive at the place he could glimpse in the distance.

He hoped against hope that the distant glimpse was not merely an illusion.

And once he arrived there, what would he do?

“I know there is something beyond all this.”

For that reason, he decided to start it all again.

Afterword

I've left you waiting for quite a while. This is Mizuki Shoutarou. Thank you for buying this and thank you for sticking with me to the end. I am truly thankful. If this is your first time with the series, I hope you will go ahead and buy all of the volumes. I kind of doubt you can enjoy just this final volume, but you can start with Volume 6 if you saw the anime.

As an author, I am usually prepared for a single series to last for one to three years, but that is only if it has regular releases. This one took approximately six years. That was probably a long time for the readers, especially the students. That is the same length of time as middle school to college entrance exams. Looking back at my own past, a year seemed like a long time back then.

I know it's a problem for me to say it, but I started this series with the idea that I would keep it going as long as I could without thinking much about where it was headed. Even so, the last bit became kind of hard to understand. I think the six year time period helped in that regard. If you did not understand it at the time, you can reread it after reading plenty of other books and you should understand where I was coming from a little more.

The light novel industry has a lot of unfinished or cancelled series, so I am truly fortunate to have finished a series like this. Not only that, I had the wonderful experience of getting a drama CD, a manga from the illustrator himself, and an anime. I would like to thank everyone involved in all of that.

As for my state of affairs or at least my situation a bit before writing this, what is written in this book is accurate. There are of course some differences, but I feel like I had a similar experience.

Even so, I am prepared to continue as an author. I will say goodbye for now, but I hope you will show some interest if you ever come across the name Mizuki again.

April 2014. Mizuki Shoutarou.

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